ONCE UPON A
Time Travel
SARIAH WILSON

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Once Upon a Time Travel

Sariah Wilson

KINDLE PRESS

OTHER TITLES BY SARIAH WILSON

The Royals of Monterra

Royal Date
Royal Chase
Royal Games
Royal Design

Stand-Alone Novels

The Ugly Stepsister Strikes Back

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For Nadia Bjorlin and Jay Kenneth Johnson – my OTP
And to all the Phloe fans out there
P & C 4EVER

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CHAPTER ONE

“It’s a good thing this chick’s been dead for two hundred years. Otherwise I’d consider offing her myself,” I muttered as Bex—my roommate, coworker, and current best friend—brought out a whole new stack of household letters we had to categorize by subject.

Which was easy enough. All of Mrs. Kitty Farnsworth’s letters could be classified as: boring, more boring, and sucking my will to live. This level of monotony should have been against the law.

“Amen,” Bex murmured. “Some small part of me likes the idea of being born in this time period, but this housekeeper is making me hate the entire nineteenth century.”

As she started scanning the latest self-important, stupid letter, I pressed my face on the thick glass that protected the shelves of old books. My fingers curled up against the barrier as I again wished that I could pick the lock. It should be a crime to keep so many great authors imprisoned.

“I get it,” I said. “Balls, carriages, pretty dresses. But no plumbing, no electricity, and no reality television. No thanks.”

“Stop fogging up the glass, and come help me with these letters.” She said “letters” like it was a dirty word, even though her adorable British accent softened the *R* at the end, making it sound like “lett-uhs.”

Trying not to sigh, I sat at the desk next to her. This was where we spent most of our evenings going through the letters and journals of Mrs. Farnsworth, onetime housekeeper here at Hartley Hall. What had once been an opulent and extravagant home in the heart of London now served as a museum full of antiques and papers that needed to be summarized and scanned. Graduate students like Bex were permitted to work on their projects after hours, and I found myself staying here instead of leaving when my workday ended. Much as I disliked what we were working on at present, I loved everything else about this job.

Like how gorgeous the library was. Despite the fact that some fascist had locked up all of the beautiful vintage books, I loved the dark wood furniture, the antique rugs, and the faint scent of tobacco that gave it all a very masculine feel. Everything in the house spoke of elegance and class

in a tasteful we-have-more-money-than-the-queen sort of way. It certainly beat my job last summer working as a lifeguard for screaming three-year-olds.

“Why are you working here if you hate the nineteenth century?” I asked as I took the stack of letters Bex had already gone through.

“I fancied a git obsessed with Waterloo and Napoleon and helped him with his research. The relationship ended, but since I was already pointed in that direction, I decided to get my graduate degree in women’s studies in the early eighteen hundreds.” Bex stopped to tuck some loose strands of red hair under the rubber band that held her messy bun in place. “When I took this position, I had hoped for something more interesting than the housekeeper’s daily accountings.”

She had a point. Not only was old Mrs. Farnsworth more boring than a roomful of politicians doing PowerPoint presentations, she sounded unbelievably self-righteous and annoying in her diary entries. And what sort of person handwrote copies of her letters?

I carefully positioned the yellowed paper on the scanner’s window and put the lid down. When I pushed the button, the machine emitted a high-pitched whine while it copied the page. “At least you know what you want to do with your life.”

“And you don’t?”

I didn’t. That was why I was here in England, trying to figure it out. I had graduated with a degree in American history but wasn’t sure what my next step was. Teacher? Librarian? Graduate school? Nothing sang out to me. There was no calling that I felt obligated to fulfill, no career that interested me.

There was also this feeling of restlessness, like I was waiting for something, or someone, to happen in my life.

“Nope. No major ambition in life, I’m afraid.”

“I suppose you could get married and have a houseful of children.”

She was being sarcastic, but honestly, some part of the white-picket-fence dream appealed to me. I never had a home of my own. At least, not one that I remember. All I remembered were the foster and group homes. But marriage was so not in the cards for me. Not only was I way too young at twenty-two, but I had zero prospects on that front. Not to mention that men generally sucked.

“In order for that to happen, somebody would have to actually ask me out on a date. All guys want is to hang out and hook up.” Which I was not into.

She raised one eyebrow at me, and I tried to think of a transatlantic slang translation. “They want to spend noncommittal time with you and have no-strings-attached sex.” I held one of the letters aloft. “Despite their lack of access to hygiene products, at least men back then knew how to court a woman.”

Bex laughed. “They didn’t exactly date, either, Emma. They went to a party, fell in lust, and stayed married all their miserable lives.”

“But I bet there was some dating involved and the men were the ones who did the asking. Like, I have no intention of getting married, but I might consider it for the next guy who actually asked me out. Because he liked me and wanted to get to know me better.”

“In that case, we’ll be old spinsters together. I’ve given up men.”

I pointed at the portrait of the museum’s current owner that hung on the wall directly across from the desk. “You can’t give up. What about Charlie Portwood?” Bex had a massive crush on the young earl, who had given me a scholarship and a job through his foundation. He was twenty-eight, handsome, charming, very single, and obviously had a ton of money. He didn’t do it for me at all, but Bex went all googly-eyed and slack-jawed whenever he walked in the room. “You should totally go after him.”

“Me?” She gaped at me in horror, as if I’d just suggested she should kidnap babies. “Go after one of England’s most eligible bachelors?”

“Why not?”

“First of all, Charles Portwood . . .”

As if on cue, the door to the library swung open, and the man being discussed entered. I only just refrained from asking him if his ears had been burning, knowing how much it would embarrass Bex. She tended to blush all over her exposed flesh, thanks to her pale skin. It was actually something we’d bonded over, initially. How we couldn’t tan.

“Oh.” He sounded surprised. “I didn’t realize anyone was still here . . . I just came in to get some papers . . .” The Earl of Hartley shifted his briefcase from one hand to the other and looked toward the door. “I didn’t mean to disturb you, Bex and . . .”

His gaze drifted in my direction. He obviously didn’t remember my name. It wasn’t surprising. I was very insignificant in his world. I stood up

and held out my right hand to him. He looked directly at me then, taking my hand and shaking it briefly. There was something about his eyes that felt familiar. A weird, cold shiver coiled up in my stomach. I brushed it off.

"I'm Emma Damon. In case you forgot. Your, um . . ." What was I supposed to call him again? Lordship? Majesty? Earlness?

"Charlie, please," he said with a smile. A look of recognition lit up his features as he placed me. "You're the one here on the foundation's scholarship, correct?"

I nodded.

"Are you enjoying your time here in London?"

"Definitely. I can't tell you how grateful I am to be here."

He held a hand up, as if embarrassed. "Think nothing of it, really."

Bex sat silently next to me, apparently forgetting how to talk as she ogled Charlie. Not that I could blame her. Being nearly six feet tall myself, I had an appreciation for any guy who had three or four inches on me. His blond hair, blue eyes, and deep tan reminded me of the surfers I had mooned over all four years of college in California.

I was glad I wasn't attracted to him, because Bex might have cut my brake lines if I ever infringed on her turf.

An awkward silence filled the room until the earl cleared his throat and said, "I know we met at your interview, but do I know you from somewhere else? You seem familiar to me."

Weird. Hadn't I just thought that a second ago? But Charlie and I didn't exactly run in the same social circles. My lips twitched with a smile. "I don't think so," I replied, while covertly shooting Bex a *talk-to-him* look.

More silence, more awkwardness. Bex had turned into a frozen statue of herself, unable to move. I noticed that he wasn't really looking at her, like he was avoiding it. Interesting. Maybe he liked her, too. "I should just get those papers I came for."

He walked over to a cabinet on the far wall, opening it with a key from his pocket. As he pulled documents out, I nudged her with my elbow. "Mary, Mary, quite contrary, your garden won't ever grow if you don't ever talk to him."

She gave me a dirty look. "You know I hate it when you call me that."

And apparently I hadn't been as quiet as I'd thought. Charlie's hand stilled, and he turned toward us. "Mary?" he repeated. He had heard every

word. Humiliation washed through me. I could only imagine how she felt. “I thought your name was Rebecca?”

“Common mistake.” She could finally speak to him. “Everybody thinks Bex is short for Rebecca. But I was the worst player on my football team, so they called me Bex for David Beckham as a joke. It stuck.” Not to mention that she’d told me multiple times how much she hated the name Mary. Better to have a cute nickname with a stupid origin than use her real name.

“Mary Smith?” he said, and I realized that his face had gone white. “Is your name Mary Frances Smith?”

“Mary Frances?” I repeated with a hoot. She’d never told me that part. “Did your parents want you to be a nun?”

She seemed very confused. “Yes, my name is Mary Frances Smith. Why?”

“I thought . . . I never checked . . .” His eyes widened as his voice faltered. Things had definitely taken a turn for the weird.

Without explaining himself, he grabbed his briefcase while mumbling what sounded like an apology as he bolted out the door. He even left the cabinet door wide open in his hurry to escape.

I could see the confusion and disappointment on her face. “Bex . . .”

“Wanker.” No translation necessary. She gave me a weak smile and added, “This is why I don’t tell people my real name, and this is why I’m giving men up. It’s gotten so bad I am literally driving them away.” She sighed loudly, and I couldn’t blame her. “It’s probably for the best, though. My mother always says that men who look like film stars tend to cheat like them.”

A grandfather clock bonged from another room, which made her glance at her phone. “Sod it! We’re late for our self-defense class.” She turned into a cleaning whirlwind, and before I could respond, she’d returned all the letters back to the desk drawer and locked it.

Bex was going to leave. Charlie Portwood had already come and gone. The summer was almost over. This might be it. My last chance.

“I think I’ll skip it.” I hoped I sounded casual. “I’ve got the general idea—kick him where it counts, blah, blah, blah.”

She put her purse strap over her chest. “You live in London. You never know when you might need it. Look at how I had to self-defend Tony out of our flat.”

“Self-defend?” I repeated with a laugh. I had to rearrange my amused expression at her serious one. “I think when you hit him first it’s self-offense.”

She shoved folders and notebooks into her satchel. “Defense, offense, it’s his own fault for shagging Kitty O’Brien in my room. I mean, honestly, what kind of name is Kitty? Who would do such a thing to a child? Didn’t her parents realize with that kind of name she’d grow up to be either a stripper or a prostitute?”

I refrained from reminding her about the Mary Frances thing and tapped a pencil against the top of the desk, willing her to leave. “Mrs. Farnsworth aside, I’m sure there are lots of nice women named Kitty.”

“Name one.”

“Well, there’s, uh . . .”

She crossed her arms in smug triumph. “See? You can’t! Even Jane Austen made Kitty a slutty tramp.”

I’d read the book once my freshman year, but we’d just watched the movie version a week ago. “You’re thinking of Lydia. She’s the one who ran off with Wickham. Kitty was the air-headed sister. But there have to be decent women with that name. To assume that they’re all exactly the same is . . . name-ist.”

That caused one corner of her mouth to edge its way up. I was relieved that she could smile again. “All this drama, all this emotional pain. This is the reason why I don’t have sex.” The other reason was because apparently nobody wanted to have sex with me. Well, that wasn’t strictly true—I could probably do it if I was willing to lower my standards. But I wanted my first time to be with somebody I loved and was committed to. Which no male in the world seemed to be interested in.

“You do realize that eventually it probably will happen, yeah? You’re the one who brought them up, but I’m fairly certain the nuns won’t take you if you’re not Catholic.”

I flipped my pencil at her, and she giggled as she put her satchel over her shoulder and slipped her phone into her pocket. “One night I’m going to get you properly intoxicated, and we’ll see what we can do about your status.”

“Not going to happen,” I told her, glad that she could smile and tease and Charlie Portwood seemed forgotten.

She stood there expectantly. “Are you really not coming with me?”

“You go on,” I said. “I’ll see you later.”

“What are you going to . . . oh.” She narrowed her eyes at me, giving me her most severe glare. I didn’t have to explain. Bex knew exactly why I wanted to stay. I probably shouldn’t have told her.

“Well, don’t get caught. I don’t want to be sacked.”

“I won’t.”

She stayed in place, studying me. A strange pang seized my heart. I suddenly felt like I would never see her again. I jumped up and hugged her, which surprised both of us. “Be sure to take an umbrella,” I told her. “Surprisingly enough, it seems to be raining yet again.”

Bex laughed. It always rained in London. “I’ll see you at home.”

I unplugged my cell phone from the charger, slipping it into my pocket. We walked into the front hallway together, and I told her to be careful as she headed out into the storm toward the underground. Or subway, as I called it.

Closing the door quietly, I went down the hall to the guard station. I stuck my head in the open doorway. “Bertie, I’m going upstairs for a sec.”

The guard in the small room filled with monitors waved me on, unhearing. Manchester United was playing. I could have belly danced naked holding a beer in one hand and a sub sandwich in the other as I set the mansion on fire and Bertie still wouldn’t have stopped watching the game.

I edged into the room to take one of his flashlights. Knowing that he’d be totally engrossed in his television for at least another half hour, I sprinted up the stairs to the second floor. I climbed over the thick velvet rope barricade at the top of the steps.

A loud crash of thunder shook the entire house. I jumped, my heart in my throat. I despised thunder. And while it had hardly ever been a problem in California, it was a constant one in England. “I’m a grown woman,” I reminded myself. “I don’t need to be terrified of thunder.” I checked my phone for the weather report, rationally showing my freaked-out psyche that this storm wasn’t supposed to last for very long. The paralyzing fear still came, and I had to curl up in a ball next to the wall for a minute. Fortunately, the center of the storm moved farther away until the thunder became a slight rumbling sound in the distance. My heartbeat returned to normal, and my body stopped shaking.

“You are fine,” I said through gritted teeth, standing up. I slid my phone back into my front pocket. Someday I’d stop acting like a scared little girl during a storm. It was ridiculous.

I’d wanted a full tour of the museum ever since I started working here, but we were only allowed access to certain rooms on the first floor. The brochure had a bedroom called the Rose Room—a lady’s bedroom, decorated in shades of pink and gold. I didn’t know why I wanted to look at it so badly. Maybe because it was off-limits. I’d never been a big fan of rules.

Now I had a chance to finally enter this forbidden bedroom with no one telling me not to touch or to be careful. What could be better?

Maybe it even had some books in it. That would be better.

Problem was, I wasn’t exactly sure where it was located. I opened several doors, sticking my head inside. None of them were it. Everything was starting to feel a bit creepy. Like I was Nancy Drew in *The Mystery of the Spooky Attic*. It wasn’t helped by the elongated hallway full of portraits that seemed to be watching me. I understood why they closed this area off. Not only was there the creep factor, but tourists would probably touch everything. I wouldn’t want people’s grubby hands all over my family’s pictures, either. Well, I wouldn’t if I had any family.

This house had too many bedrooms. It was starting to get annoying. And that soccer game would eventually end and Bertie would see what I was up to, and I’d get both Bex and me fired.

With a sense of urgency, I started checking the rooms faster. Still no Rose Room.

Maybe I should just make do with one of the others. Investigate and explore and then head back downstairs.

But even as I thought it, I knew I wouldn’t do it. Rose Room or bust.

Then, toward the end of the hallway, I put my hand on what felt like the hundredth doorknob, and a sense of premonition tickled the back of my mind. This was it. It had to be.

CHAPTER TWO

I was right. The Rose Room. I closed the door shut behind me and flicked my flashlight around. I saw a white four-poster bed made up with a pale rose quilt. There was a large white armoire with curlicue edges that towered over me on the left.

Next to the bed was a little nightstand with a silver mirror and old-fashioned hairbrush. I sat down carefully on the bed, touching the mirror and brush lightly. There were chairs to sit in, a massive fireplace, and as I flicked my flashlight over to the opposite side, I saw a very large portrait hanging on the wall.

"Wow," was all I could manage.

It was a full-length picture of a nobleman dressed up just like the dudes in that *Pride and Prejudice* movie we'd watched. When I reached his face, my flashlight wobbled a bit. To say he was handsome would have been insulting. To him. Because he was godlike perfection. I sucked my breath in, a little disturbed that I was this attracted to a painting. He had that sort of blondish-brownish hair that I loved, high cheekbones that I bet made dimples when he smiled, and unsettling dark-blue eyes.

I imagined what it would be like to meet this man at a ball. Realistically, he'd never notice me. But in my imagination, I could smile and bat my lashes at him and say, *Why yes, I would love to dance with you*.

Then we'd twirl around the dance floor. Never mind that I didn't know how to dance like that. It was my fantasy. I was the world's best dancer.

I came out of my daydream long enough to notice something weird. His left index finger pointed east. Almost like he was pointing at something in particular.

Which wasn't possible, right? But I had goose bumps. Real, actual goose bumps.

What if?

I couldn't help it. I walked up to the wall, tracing the path from his hand. My fingers ran over the light-pink wallpaper decorated with a gold overlay design. Just when I'd convinced myself that this was all so stupid, I hit a groove in the wall. I held the flashlight over where my fingers had

stopped but couldn’t see anything. I followed the groove, and it extended to a corner before running back across the top of the picture.

A door. I had found a door.

Excited, I tried to find a handle. A latch. I still couldn’t believe I had found a secret door. This was Narnia-level exciting.

But despite running my hand all over the open space between the seam and the portrait, I couldn’t find a way to open the door. I stepped back, shining my light around the painting, hoping to see something that I’d been unable to feel.

“Where is it?” I asked the man in frustration. I couldn’t have explained why, but I had to open this door. I had to see what was on the other side.

Bright lightning flashed outside, and for a brief moment the entire room lit up. My heart slammed into my chest, and I tried to regulate my breathing. I was fine. And I had a mystery to solve.

I sat back down on the bed and stared at the portrait. I tried to figure out what I was missing. It occurred to me that maybe he wasn’t pointing at something. Maybe his hand was the clue.

I rushed back over to the painting, and it creaked as I lifted it up slightly. I reached behind it and was immediately rewarded with finding a small depression. Some sort of rope hung down, and without thinking, I tugged on it.

The door groaned in protest as it ripped away from the wall. Dust flew out through the opening. I coughed and waved the cloud away from my face.

I was so going to jail. I had just defaced a wall in a museum. I could almost hear Bex asking me if I planned to take a can of spray paint to the Mona Lisa next.

I should turn around and go. Push the door back into place and hope no one ever noticed. Or that I’d be back in America by the time they did.

But I couldn’t. A restless, frenetic energy rushed into my bloodstream, and my heart began to beat even faster. I accepted that my being arrested was inevitable. I absolutely had to see what was behind that door.

I opened the door farther, ignoring the sound of ripping wallpaper. “In for a penny, in for a pound,” like Bex would say. I walked through the doorway and found myself in a cramped, windowless room.

I had expected the cobwebs and the musty scent of a room left unaired for a long time, but I stopped short at the sound of a chorus of murmuring

women’s voices. Spidery shivers crawled all over my back.

“Okay, I have officially lost my mind,” I said out loud, swinging my light toward where the voices seemed to be coming from. Thankfully, that made the voices stop.

I nearly jumped out of my skin when I saw another person in the room, causing icy fear to clamp over my pounding heart. I’d been caught! It took me a second to figure out that it was my reflection in a dusty mirror.

Letting out a sigh of relief, I stepped forward and heard a sound. I had kicked something. Something big.

It was a long, ivory-colored box. I lifted the lid. There was a beautiful pale-violet silk dress inside. Putting the flashlight under my arm, I lifted the dress up. It had a high waist and delicate purple flowers embroidered around the neckline. A darker purple sash tied in the back. I held it against me and realized that the dress went all the way to the floor. I had never in my whole life been able to find a dress or skirt that went to my ankles, let alone one this long. This seemed wrong. Weren’t all the women back then hobbit-size?

I bit the inside of my cheek to stop my current impulse. I wanted to try the dress on. Wanted it as much as I had wanted to investigate the Rose Room and as much as I had wanted to open the secret door. After a minimal mental struggle where I didn’t try very hard to stop myself, I put the flashlight on a shelf pointed toward the mirror. Using my hand, I swiped off as much dust as I could from the mirror so that I could see my reflection.

Sliding the dress over my head, I pulled it down. The fabric strained against my ribs, making it hard to breathe deeply. I probably should have undone the sash first. It fit, but barely. If I moved too quickly or bent over, it would probably burst open. But it was so pretty. I dusted off the surface of the mirror, studying myself. I smiled. I actually looked . . . good. This dress hid all my flaws. Like my ginormous hips.

Kicking off my flats, I had a certain amount of satisfaction that the dress did indeed cover my feet completely. I probably should have taken off my jeans and T-shirt. But getting almost naked in this little closet was a step too far, even for me.

I brushed my free hand along the material to straighten the folds and felt a small piece of paper pinned to the dress. Weird. As soon as I touched it, the paper fluttered to the floor. I maneuvered myself carefully and bent

down to retrieve it. I grabbed the flashlight off the shelf to read the crinkled slip.

For the millionth time that night, my heart pounded erratically. “It can’t be,” I whispered. The writing . . . the writing looked like mine. As if I had written it.

There was no possible way. It was beyond ridiculous. I shook my head. People had similar handwriting styles. Apparently my vandalism and destruction of property messed with my head.

What did it say? They weren’t English words. It looked like a phonetic spelling of a foreign language. I said each word aloud carefully, wondering if I could figure out what language it was. Latin, maybe?

As soon as I stopped speaking, the flashlight blinked off, and an oppressive, suffocating darkness filled the room. I banged on the flashlight twice, trying to get it to turn back on. When it didn’t work, I let it fall to the floor. I had to get out of here. A strange, bubbly sensation engulfed me, and, somehow, I was surrounded by wind. Silvery terror exploded in my stomach when the closet door slammed shut.

The storm outside worsened. I tried calling for help, but the lightning flared up and struck over and over while the thunder made the house shake. I grabbed for the door, desperate to escape. I had to get out.

The wind raged harder, and I got caught up in a mini tornado that spun me around and around. I couldn’t move, couldn’t get away.

I tried to scream, but there was no sound. My last thought was that I didn’t have to worry about going to jail. I was going to die.

Then the blackness swallowed me whole.

* * *

I groaned as I came to. My head throbbed, and I squeezed my eyelids shut against the pain. My chin was sticky from where I had drooled. Gross. I rubbed my skin while cracking one lid open. I was on a wooden floor.

Where was I? What happened? I forced both eyes open. Sunlight flooded in through the door.

I had slept in the closet. Prisons didn’t have wooden floors, did they? No one had found me yet. I yanked up my skirt and pulled my phone out of my jeans’ front pocket, turning it on. No missed calls. Bex was probably off ecstatically celebrating the fact that I’d finally spent a night away from

home. The museum, on the other hand, was going to be none too happy about all the laws I'd managed to break.

Putting my phone back, I attempted to sit up. My movements were restricted by the throbbing headache and the too-tight dress. The dress that I now planned to return to its box before anyone knew I'd had my own personal fashion show with a priceless heirloom that was probably hundreds of years old.

But there was no box. It was gone. I couldn't find my shoes, either.

The mirror had disappeared, and the shelves weren't dusty. There were no cobwebs. Instead there were a row of boxes and some trunks leaning against the wall.

There was no question; they definitely hadn't been there last night.

If someone had come in, changed the closet around, and taken the box and my shoes, why didn't they wake me up?

Whoever had taken my shoes probably wanted to make sure I couldn't run off before they could call the police or Scotland Yard or MI6 or whomever it was the British called when people destroyed expensive property.

I rolled onto my knees and stood up. The room wobbled, and I put my hand against the door to steady myself. After a few deep breaths, I felt like me again. Time to go out and take my punishment like a man. Er, woman.

Holding my head high, I stepped into the room and tried not to scream. The room, which last night had been done up in shades of pink and gold, was now decorated in pastel greens. My mouth opened as I slowly turned around. The furniture was different. Now it was a dark cherry wood and not white. There was no armoire. The bed had been moved. And wasn't a four-poster bed.

Whirling around, I closed the closet door. Which was definitely a closet door and not covered in wallpaper. There were no tears, no rips.

And my Mr. Dead-But-Still-Super-Hot crush was no longer hanging on the door.

Nothing in this room was the way it had been last night.

I checked my Mickey Mouse watch. I had come up to this room twelve hours ago. How could anyone have done all of this in twelve hours? *Why* would someone do it?

None of it made any sense. I had to get home. The police could arrest me there just as easily as they could here.

A young woman walked into the room carrying a pile of what looked like sheets in her arms. I didn't recognize her, but I didn't know anyone on the cleaning crew. She wore a white, flouncy cap and had a stiff-looking blue cotton dress on. Did they normally dress in costume to clean?

She hummed softly to herself, obviously unaware of me. I wondered if she had earbuds in.

"Hi," I said, waving my hand so she could see me. The woman jumped, placing her palm over her heart.

"Sorry," I said. "Didn't mean to scare you. I was just coming out of the closet. Not metaphorically out of the closet, because I, you know, like men." Realizing how stupid I sounded, my brain decided to make it worse. "Not that you're not attractive, it's just how I am."

The woman dropped the sheets, grabbed her skirts, and ran out of the room. I chased after her. This was bad. Very, very bad. "Wait!" I called out.

If I could stop her from talking to anyone in charge, I knew I could make her see that this situation wasn't all that terrible. I'd managed to talk my way out of my last three speeding tickets. A janitor seemed much less daunting than an officer.

When the yelling started, I knew it was all over. I got to the landing, and the velvet rope had been removed. Strange. I didn't have time to think much about it because there was a full-on explosion happening in the main hallway. The woman was shrieking at an older man in a dark, old-fashioned-looking blue suit. Two younger men in matching pale-blue velvet suits with silver trimming rushed over to the duo. They were both wearing white wigs. Like they were in a George Washington fan club.

When I got to the bottom of the stairs, all four heads swiveled to look at me.

"If you'll just let me explain," I said as I approached the group.

"Who are you?" the older man demanded in clipped, precise tones. "Who provided you entry to this home?"

I started to explain when the double doors to my left swung open. "What is the meaning of this?"

The bones in my knees went hollow, and I fought to stay upright. I must have hit myself harder than I'd thought.

It was him. This beautiful man demanding to know what was going on was the man from the portrait. He had the same pair of vibrant blue eyes

that had seduced me into this mess in the first place. He towered over me as he came closer. I could only stare at his perfect face and natural, sun-kissed highlights that any woman would maim someone for. He had an overwhelming, powerful presence that seemed to fill the whole hallway.

Not to mention that he was authentically shaggable, as Bex would say. I had to look away because I was so obviously staring. I glanced into the library, the room he had just come from.

The library that had no glass case over the books.

Ignoring God's gift to women, I pushed past him to go into the library.

"Now see here . . ." the older man said, but I didn't care. Everything in this room had changed. The furniture, the books, the desk that Bex and I were working at last night. My purse wasn't on the desk. My umbrella wasn't sitting next to the door. A man was sitting in an armchair I'd never seen before, and he stood up when he saw me. He looked as confused and bewildered as I felt.

Panic shot through me, and I ran back into the hallway. Bertie worked at night. Who was the day-shift guard? He would help. I threw open the door to the guard station.

But there was no room. Only a small coat closet.

My head still pounded with pain as I tried to swim through the murky haze in my mind to make sense of what was going on. My chest tightened, making it difficult to breathe. I forced air in and out of my lungs. I became aware of voices behind me, but they sounded muted, as if the people were very far away.

I turned to look at them, but I still couldn't hear them. I could only focus on their clothing. Even Mr. Delicious was in costume. What was the deal? Halloween was months away. I'd never heard of the museum doing any kind of reenactment. Did they have a *come to work as your favorite Jane Austen character* day?

I shook my head, trying to bring everything back into focus.

It must have worked, because I heard Sheer Perfection say, "Stephens, would you please escort the young lady upstairs to lie down? She looks as if she has been through something of an ordeal. We can straighten this out after she's had a chance to rest."

His voice was as beautiful as his face. Deep, masculine, perfectly posh and British. But I wasn't going upstairs. "No way. I'm going home."

The man in the library came out to join the newly forming lynch mob. “Perhaps we could adjourn to the parlor to ascertain her identity?” He gestured toward the couch inside the room.

Seeing that escape was impossible, my feet put themselves on automatic, and I shuffled into the library ahead of the two men. I couldn’t help it. I started to shake. I wondered if I was in shock. I wrapped my arms around my body, hugging myself. “Not happening,” I muttered. “This is not happening.”

I sunk down on a small sofa, slouching against the back. “This can’t be real,” I whispered. The two men seated themselves across from me, both sitting at the edge of their chairs with perfect posture.

There had to be a rational explanation. “Is this a TV show?” I asked. “Are there hidden cameras? Am I being Punk’d?”

The men exchanged confused glances. Mr. Father of My Future Children said, “I am not certain what you are asking.” An uncomfortable silence filled the room until he continued, “You are Miss Emily Blythe, correct?”

“Emma,” I said in a distracted tone as I studied a marble statue on the mantel that I’d never laid eyes on before. “My name is Emma.”

“I beg your pardon; I was certain that your father said that your name was . . . Regardless, we have been waiting for you, and I am glad that you have finally come.” He didn’t sound glad. He sounded very unglad.

Could this be the Twilight Zone? Or had Bex made good on her threat to intoxicate me? I didn’t feel drunk. Maybe food poisoning?

Or was I high? Had someone slipped me something? If I was drugged, I now understood why my sophomore roommate never left our dorm room. Everything was so vivid, so real. So fantastical.

I couldn’t be dead. Surely my head wouldn’t be throbbing like this if I were dead. I had to be dreaming. It was the only logical explanation for my present situation. But I’d never had a dream like this. Maybe I had been hit by a bus on my way home and was lying in a hospital bed somewhere in a coma and hooked up to an IV. Maybe to distract my body from pain, my mind had created this fantasy to let me escape. That could explain why my head hurt so much.

Somehow I’d tumbled down the rabbit hole. How could I wake myself up?

“Ah, here is the tea,” the other man said. The guy dressed like a servant put a silver tea set down on the table in front of me.

“Oh good,” I said. “Just perfect. A tea party. Is the Mad Hatter going to show up?”

The men gave each other perplexed looks, ignoring my question. “Would you care for some tea, Miss Blythe?” the Hottest Man in the Universe asked in a patronizing sort of way.

Miss Blythe, was it? Well, since I was in Wonderland, I might as well play along. It didn’t matter because this could not be real. No man could be this incredibly handsome. They were only figments of my imagination. A dream. An escapist fantasy.

I could do whatever I wanted.

Relief flooded through me at finally coming up with the only rational explanation for my situation, relaxing my limbs. “No thanks. I don’t really drink tea.”

“Don’t drink . . .” the other man sputtered until Mr. McAwesome gave him a silencing look. Oh, he was the boss. I liked it. The other man nodded in return.

Then the portrait man gave me another fake, small smile. “May I ask what happened to your dress?”

“My dress?” I repeated in a panicked tone, worried that this had turned into the naked dream. A quick glance down told me that I was still clothed. It was more wrinkled than it had been. “I guess I sort of slept in it.”

“How is it you came to be here?” He spoke to me like I was a small child.

Did he mean last night? “Um, I was running late, so I splurged and took a cab.”

He shifted slightly in his seat. “Where are your things? Your trunks? Your maid?”

Trunks? Maid? “My what?”

“Perhaps she had an accident and was injured . . . or was assaulted,” the other man said in a stage whisper to the first.

“Were you assaulted? Have you been harmed?”

“What? No!” I was positive I would have remembered if something like that had happened. Wouldn’t I?

Both men seemed relieved to hear it. “Do you know who you are?” the Most Beautiful Man Alive asked.

I got the sense that he wouldn't be amused if I answered, "Your future wife, obviously." So instead I said, "Yes, I know who I am. I'm not really sure who you are or where I am."

Or when, whispered a voice. I was not going to consider that as a possibility because it couldn't happen.

"You are in Hartley Hall. And I am the Earl of Hartley," he replied.

I laughed, and then I couldn't help but laugh harder at the expression of shock on the "earl's" face.

"Wait, you're serious?" I said when the giggling subsided. "Sorry to tell you, but I know the Earl of Hartley. I work for the Earl of Hartley. And you, sir, are no Earl of Hartley."

The wannabe earl looked at me like I was stupid. He had to be the worst imaginary man ever. Maybe I should remind him this was *my* fantasy. Shouldn't he be feeding me grapes and waxing poetic about my eyes?

"I assure you, Miss Blythe, I am the Earl of Hartley." He sounded forceful, commanding. If I didn't find the whole thing so absurd I might have been intimidated.

"Oh, okay. You're the Earl of Hartley." I stifled a snort. I guess he didn't know that I'd actually met Charlie Portwood. I looked at the second man. "Are you the Earl of Hartley, too?"

"Since we have dispensed with so many formalities today already, I might as well introduce myself." The second man stood, giving me a slight bow. "Sir Matthew Riverton at your service, Miss Blythe. It is my great pleasure to make your acquaintance." He sat back down.

"Hey, Matt. What's up?"

In unison both men lifted their eyes to the ceiling, then lowered their gazes back to me. "Do you see something up there, Miss Blythe?" the "earl" asked in a cautious tone.

"What? No. 'What's up' is an expression for saying 'How are you?' or 'How's it going?'" This could end up being a tedious experience if I had to explain everything to the dream men. Next time I'd have to tell my subconscious to conjure up men who understood American slang. Like having to explain everything to Bex in my real life wasn't enough of a hassle already.

The older man in the dark-blue suit, the one the earl had called Stephens, stole into the room so quietly that I nearly yelped when he spoke. "The physician has arrived, my lord."

“Physician? A doctor? No, no, no,” I said as I scooted as far back as I could into the sofa. “I don’t do doctors. Or hospitals.”

“I would never take you to a hospital.” The earl looked and sounded insulted. “Dr. Taylor is an excellent physician. The wound on your forehead needs to be tended to.”

“Wound?” I echoed, immediately on my feet. The earl and Sir Matthew Riverton stood up as soon as I did. I rushed over to study myself in the mirror above the fireplace. The earl had been right. I had a huge gash on my forehead. A small red bubble had formed at the cut. I knew what would happen if I touched it, but I poked the bubble anyway. A slight trickle of blood escaped, slithering a path down the side of my face.

“Oh no, this means I’m going to . . .” I said right as my eyes rolled back into my head and everything went black.

CHAPTER THREE

When I came to, I heard the low murmur of male voices. I slightly opened one eye and saw Matt and the fake earl standing by the fireplace. Weird. Shouldn't I have woken up back in reality? I didn't know how this all worked. I'd never passed out in a dream before.

I wanted to sit up, but I felt light-headed and woozy. Like I might faint again. So I scrunched my eyelids shut. Maybe I had to concentrate on where I wanted to be. I pictured Bex's face and chanted "Home" under my breath a few times. I even pinched my arm, which was not pleasant. Not to mention that it didn't work.

So instead I eavesdropped on the men's conversation, figuring I had the right considering it was my dream.

Or my nightmare. One I hadn't figured out how to wake up from.

"Did her father indicate to you she was so extraordinarily tall? She resembles an Amazon. Or a giantess." That was Matt. He didn't have the same smooth, deep voice as the guy pretending to be the earl.

"He did not. But it is beside the point. She's not a fish I can throw back for being the wrong size. I will have to make do."

Rude. I had zero control over my height.

"Your brother might be displeased."

"James is nearly my height, and I am a good deal taller than Miss Blythe. I can't imagine it will be an issue." The earl gave a short cough before continuing. "My only concern is whether James will find her attractive."

"She is very striking," Matt replied. "Once she is attired and outfitted properly, I think she may have the ability to appear quite comely. Wouldn't you agree?"

At that my heart nearly stopped. I should have wanted to not care about it, but any woman who said she didn't care whether or not other people thought she was attractive was completely lying. And it was earth-shatteringly important what my faux earl thought about me.

"She has possibility. She is, however, too thin."

I couldn’t help it. A lazy, satisfied smile tugged at the corners of my mouth. Too thin. This was more like it. Hopefully the hair-brushing, bonbon-feasting, and general worshipping-of-myself portion of the dream would be starting soon.

“It is too bad she isn’t a plant,” Matt mused.

“Yes, then I would have no issue getting him to wed her.” Was I imagining it, or had there been a playful tone in the earl’s voice?

And who was this James person? And why on earth would they want him to wed me? Curiouser and curiouser.

“Perhaps she hasn’t had enough to eat. Do you think a lack of food could explain her odd behavior earlier?” Matt asked. I sighed. Fun fantasy over. Instead of listing my alluring attributes, they were back to wondering about my sanity.

I decided to “wake up.” I opened both of my eyes and let out a small yelp at an elderly gentleman who was bending over me with his face close to mine. He had frizzy white hair and eyebrows like furry albino caterpillars. He gave me a pleasant, comforting smile that made me relax my grip on the blanket that someone had put over me. I was lying on the sofa. I wondered who had put me there. It did funny things to my heart as I considered the possibility that the earl had picked me up and carried me to the couch. It indicated a strength and a . . . I don’t know . . . masculinity that was strangely appealing.

“She does not have odd behavior, has excellent hearing, and doesn’t appreciate being talked about like she’s not in the room,” I said. Both men had the decency to appear embarrassed at being caught.

“Quite right, young lady,” the older man said. “I am happy to see you are awake. I am Dr. Taylor, and I performed a brief examination on you. Your wound is not very deep. I think you are going to be just fine.”

I reached up, touching the gash. The bleeding had stopped, but they hadn’t put anything on it. “Don’t I get a Band-Aid or something?”

The doctor gave me a puzzled look before turning to the other two men. “My lord, I believe your ward will make a full recovery. I recommend that she get some rest. I suggest you give her four drops of this tincture once she is upstairs.” The doctor handed the earl a bottle. He then bowed to the earl, and that stealthy ninja Stephens was back, leading Dr. Taylor from the room.

Would I get some fun attention now?

“Perhaps we should ascertain whether she is in full possession of her faculties,” Matt suggested. He bent down, nearly eye level with me. “Do you still know your name?”

“Yes,” I replied. I wasn’t an idiot.

He nodded, like he was pleased with my answer. “And who is the reigning monarch?”

“Queen Elizabeth,” I said, and watched as the corners of his mouth quirked up.

He stood and turned to the earl. “She’s only missed the mark by a couple of centuries.”

What was that supposed to mean? But before I could ask, the earl stepped in front of the sofa, glaring down at me. He was kind of intimidating. Crazy hot, but intimidating. “Per the doctor’s instructions, I will escort you upstairs. Are you able to walk?”

His bad mood was contagious. “Since I was a toddler,” I snapped back. Didn’t this guy ever smile?

Earlier I hadn’t wanted to go back upstairs, but now I wondered whether that was the answer. Maybe I had to go back to the beginning in order to wake up. I threw the blanket off and swung my legs to the floor. Both men totally averted their eyes from my feet. I looked down, wiggling my toes. What was their problem? My feet weren’t Cinderella-size or anything, but they weren’t hideous. I’d even painted Pink Passion on my toenails a couple of days ago.

“What the dev—what happened to your shoes?” my pretend earl asked, his gaze fixed on a point above my head.

“I don’t know,” I answered truthfully. “I took them off upstairs and then poof—they were gone.”

A strange expression crossed the earl’s face. Fear? Surprise? His features quickly resettled into a look of disdain. It made me wonder whether I had imagined it. “And your other belongings?”

What other stuff was I supposed to have? “Currently, I’m wearing everything I own.” Which included my regular clothes under this dress.

“I shall make arrangements to have your clothing and shoes replaced before I go.”

Go? Where was he going?

“Speaking of which, I will wait for you in the carriage, Hartley,” Matt said to the earl. It seemed strange that he called the earl by his title. Matt

turned to me and bowed slightly. “I look forward to renewing our acquaintance in the near future, Miss Blythe.”

I waved to him. “See you later.” He gave me a perplexed look, like English was my second language. Stephens again materialized in the doorway, making my heart leap in surprise. How did he do that? He literally made no sound. He was holding out a hat and coat to Matt. Matt took them and was gone. I didn’t care if he left, but I wanted my earl, or Hartley, as Matt had called him, to stay.

“You’re leaving?” I asked. Things would probably get very boring around here if he took off.

He gave me an exasperated look. “Not that it is any of your concern, but Riverton has recently come into an inheritance that he did not expect to receive. I am reviewing his newly acquired estate with him and instructing him on the management of it. I will be back in three days. Now, if you please, I will assist you to your room.”

Hartley held out his hand to me, and without hesitation, I put my hand in his. My mouth went dry when our skin made contact. My throat felt unbearably tight, and I had to drag a deep breath in. He stared down at me with an almost frightening intensity, his eyes blazing with blue fire.

I attributed my reaction to my recent fainting spell. I stood up too quickly, which made me feel light-headed again. I swayed forward, and he put his hands on my upper arms, steadying me. Electricity sparked and crackled everywhere that he was touching me. My pulse was frantic and uneven. This time when I swayed toward him, it wasn’t because I wanted to faint. It was because we were so close that I was dying to see what it would be like to kiss him.

And there was a moment, however small, when he seemed into it. Then he looked away and released me. One heartbeat passed, then another. Finally, he took my right hand and laid it on the crook of his left elbow. I *loved* when guys did that in old movies. So romantic. I had to resist the urge to stroke his dark-blue velvet sleeve. “This way,” he said in a gruff voice.

I actually struggled to keep up with his long strides. “What happened to your pins?” he asked.

I was supposed to have pens? For what? “Pens?” He was going to think I was really stupid given that every time he asked me something I just kept repeating his words back to him.

“Your pins. For your hair.”

Did he mean like bobby pins? I’d never even owned any, let alone worn them. “I don’t wear pins.”

“Don’t wear . . .” His voice trailed off, and he sounded flabbergasted.

Before he could say anything else, we arrived at the Rose Room, which was now apparently the Green Room. There were two women waiting inside for us. One was a frosty blonde with her hair pulled back so severely and tightly I wondered if her face hurt. The other I liked on sight: a redhead (like Bex) who gave me a mischievous smile that made me feel like I’d found someone to trust.

“Miss Blythe, this is Mrs. Farnsworth,” Hartley said, nodding toward the Ice Queen. It took everything in me not to let out a sigh of disgust. Well of course she was Mrs. Kitty Farnsworth, mistress of the coma-inducing letters. I supposed real life had to intrude somehow. Like those dreams where you’re washing dishes or doing homework. “She is my housekeeper. And this is . . .”

“I’m Rosemary, my lord,” the redhead said as she curtsied.

“She will serve as your lady’s maid until your own arrives. Will your maid and chaperone be here soon?”

“What? Oh, sure. All my entourage are coming.” I wanted to humor him. Especially since he hadn’t forcibly pried my fingers off his arm yet. I had, pathetically enough, developed a very real crush on this very imaginary man. Just standing close to him like this gave me a shivery pleasure in my hollowed-out stomach that I could compare only to riding a roller coaster.

I was regressing, turning back into a lovestruck teenager. Like the first time hadn’t been bad enough.

Rosemary pulled the blanket on the bed to one side. Oh, right. The doctor wanted me to rest. I was obviously supposed to get under the covers. But I wanted to stay where I was, enjoying the warmth that emanated from him.

Hartley had other ideas, and he politely but firmly extricated himself from me and moved a step away. I felt . . . I didn’t know what I felt. A little lost. Still confused. Tired. Maybe it would be good to lie down.

Feeling completely self-conscious as everyone watched me, I climbed into the massive bed and let Rosemary put the blanket back over me. She gave me a smile as she stepped back, and I instantly felt better.

The earl took her place, standing right next to me. “You need to take the medicine Dr. Taylor left with me.”

I put out my palm, expecting a pill.

He cleared his throat. “No, I need you to open your mouth. I need to place this on your tongue.”

Was it my imagination, or had his voice trembled just a little?

Despite there being other people in the room, it felt strangely intimate to have him placing those drops on my tongue. After four, he withdrew his hand, and I closed my mouth. My tongue burned. The taste was unlike anything I’d ever experienced.

And within seconds, my limbs became lethargic and everything around me had a soft haze to it. I looked up at Hartley, who, not surprisingly, still scowled. Then he gave me an assessing look, like he was trying to figure out how much he could get for me on eBay.

“I do not know what your father has told you of our arrangement, Miss Blythe, but I will go over the details when I return. James will be difficult to entice. He is quite devoted to his experiments. Do not be concerned—I have a plan.”

A giddy, bubbly feeling made me grin at him. My eyelids felt extremely heavy, and it took all the energy I had left to look up at him. I reached out and took his hand. He looked stunned.

“Since I may not see you again, I just wanted to tell you that you have this sexy, glowering Heathcliff thing going on for you that I really like. And by Heathcliff I mean the guy from *Wuthering Heights* and not the cartoon cat.” I lost the fight to keep my eyes open. I sighed and said, just before I passed out, “I hope I dream you again.”

* * *

Hartley drew back the cloth curtain and stared out the window of his carriage, pointedly ignoring his thrice-removed cousin’s attempts at conversation. A quiet rain beat against the top of the carriage in a constant fashion, and thanks to him holding up the curtain, the rain managed to make its way inside his town coach. The inclement weather matched his foul mood.

The laudanum had obviously made the girl say what she had, that nonsense about dreams and cats. But how to explain her earlier behavior?

Perhaps, as Riverton had suggested, she had been in an accident of some sort. Hartley's jaw tightened. He was certainly no stranger to the severity of accidents. He should count it fortunate that Miss Blythe survived if she had indeed been through such an experience.

If he could excuse her actions, how could he explain his own behavior? He crossed his arms over his chest. Such introspection usually did not sit well with him. He wondered if he was ill. He dispelled the notion by briefly putting the back of his hand to his forehead. Despite his hopes to the contrary, he had no fever.

He had never experienced such an immediate physical reaction to a woman. He had felt drawn to her and in the space of moments found himself imagining caressing her alabaster skin, touching her glossy raven's-wing hair, kissing her lips. With a silent growl, Hartley pushed the images from his mind. He couldn't remember ever feeling so much so soon, not even with . . .

Shifting in his seat, he refused to finish his thought, because it was a betrayal of her. A betrayal of the love they had shared. He would not think it. But when he shut down that line of thinking, his thoughts immediately again turned to Miss Blythe. The mere fact that he had chosen, even in his mind, to describe her as having raven's-wing hair and alabaster skin showed how tragic he had become. He'd be writing bad love poetry next.

Hartley arrived at the conclusion that he had been without feminine companionship for far too long. How else could he explain his bizarre attraction to a woman who was disheveled, disoriented, and quite possibly a bit mad? No wonder her father had been so eager to agree to the deal. Dash it all, the impertinent chit had been bleeding and still he found her alluring.

Perhaps it had been the fact that her hair had not been pinned. The only time he saw a woman with her hair down was right before they did things that would have ruined any artfully arranged coiffure. No lady appeared in anyone's presence with her hair down.

And her feet . . . they were bloody indecent. How had she lost her shoes? Their sudden disappearance concerned him because of the possible implications. That also did not bear thinking about. Instead he focused on her running about shoeless. What possessed her to do such a thing? If the gossips of the *ton* had seen her . . .

He knew he had only exacerbated the entire situation by not leaving Miss Blythe at the threshold of her bedroom. He should have let Mrs. Farnsworth or the maid administer the tincture. When Miss Blythe's delicate pink tongue had darted out, it had nearly been his undoing. Like some bloody schoolboy. And like a green lad, his hand actually tingled, burned where she had touched him. Hartley flexed said hand, willing his thoughts to change their course. But they would not.

"Miss Blythe seems a bit unconventional. But your brother may like that."

Riverton's voice pulled Hartley from his reverie. He dropped the curtain back into place as he momentarily regretted his decision to confide the truth of his scheme to Riverton. He'd had little choice when Miss Blythe had shown up in such a state. Hartley preferred things to be orderly. Calculated. For them to make sense. Riverton immediately divined that something strange was happening, as Hartley did not allow any sort of nonsense in his life.

But Riverton knowing changed nothing. Fortunately, he would be tucked away at his estate, trying to undo the mess his uncle and elder cousin had made. He would not be in London to interfere or divulge information. The plan would be successful. The earldom would have its heir.

"I do not wish to discuss Miss Blythe any further, Riverton. We should make better use of our time by going over your financial books that you brought with her." He gave him a look that would have immediately quieted anyone else.

Hartley's look had no such luck with Riverton.

"With her?" Riverton repeated. He wore a devilish smile that let Hartley know just how amused he was.

"I did not say 'with her.' I said 'with you.'"

Riverton added an annoying smugness to his expression. "No, you said 'with her.' Perhaps you were more affected by Miss Blythe than you care to admit. Perhaps it isn't your brother who will end up as her husband."

Hartley's temper flared, and he wondered what the penalty would be for throttling a distant family member, especially given he had just cause. Outside of his immediate family, Riverton was the only other person he'd spoken to about Libby. He should know that Hartley would not and could not love another. "Now you are being ridiculous," Hartley said, returning his gaze to the window.

“Am I?” Riverton mused.

“Enough,” Hartley ordered in an imperious tone that would have made a lesser man withdraw. He hated how close to the mark Riverton’s observations were. “As I have already stated, it is not something I wish to discuss.”

They lapsed into silence, making Hartley grateful. Miss Blythe was meant to marry his brother and provide a family full of heirs to keep the earldom from falling into the hands of any desperate cousins and to prevent James from the highly unsuitable match he seemed intent on pursuing. Once that had been arranged and the wedding done, Hartley would be able to relax. He assumed that as head of the family he could order James to marry Miss Blythe, but that would only encourage a rebellious response in him. He had no wish to drive James into Miss Godwin’s arms any sooner. James would have to be reasoned with, to understand that he had to marry a suitable woman.

Particularly since Hartley himself had no intention of marrying.

Ever.

Riverton again infringed upon his thoughts when he asked, “How do you suppose she made her toenails that color?”

“No more!” Hartley commanded, mainly to cover his embarrassment over his own illicit thoughts regarding Miss Blythe’s exotic toes.

It was going to be an unbearably long ride.

CHAPTER FOUR

I woke up, once again, slightly disoriented. A curtain had been pulled back, showing that it was a drizzly, overcast day. Still London. I had a moment of peace before I heard an unfamiliar voice ask, “Would you like some chocolate, miss?”

Sitting up, I quickly took in my surroundings. I was still *here*.

The woman that had been introduced to me as Rosemary placed a tray on the night table next to the bed. “I didn’t know if you would want to have breakfast downstairs. I thought you might prefer to dine in your room.”

That meant I had been asleep for hours and hours. As my lungs quickly expanded and contracted, the dress suddenly felt much too tight, making it so I couldn’t catch my breath. This was all wrong. I was supposed to go to sleep and wake up in reality.

I knew what this meant but couldn’t admit it. Couldn’t say it.

This was no dream.

“Do you . . . do you have a newspaper?” I asked in a strained voice, afraid I might start hyperventilating. Wasn’t that what they always did in those movies? Look at a newspaper to see the date?

“Of course,” she said. “I’ll go and fetch it for you at once.”

Once Rosemary had left the room, I realized that unshed tears burned at the corners of my eyes. Was I losing my mind? Having a nervous breakdown?

She returned quickly, not giving me much time to wonder whether or not mental illness ran in my family. I took the newspaper with shaking hands. Just from a quick glance, I realized that I had only ever seen papers like this on microfiche. Or on the Internet.

Now I held a brand-new copy of a newspaper that had been printed in . . . 1816. Monday, March 25, 1816.

“This can’t be true,” I said. “It can’t.” As if denying what I saw with my own eyes and saying the words would somehow magically make the date in front of me rearrange itself to the right one.

I had to get out. There had to be a way home. I could not be stuck in 1816. I threw my blanket off and began to run.

“Miss Blythe! Wait!” I heard Rosemary call after me. But I ran past the portraits in the hallway, only barely registering that they were different than the ones I’d seen just two nights ago, and bounded down the stairs. I rushed to the front door past several men in those same matching pale-blue outfits, still wearing their wigs.

I reached the door and yanked it open. The sun had peeked out from behind the clouds, brightening everything around me. I bolted outside, sloshing through puddles in my bare feet, and noticed that everything, absolutely everything, around me had changed. The houses looked different. There were old-fashioned lampposts. The road was not asphalt but cobblestone. I picked up my skirts and ran around the corner, away from Hartley Hall.

I’d made it only about one block, my tears blinding me, when I came to a halt. Carriages. Horses. Everyone in costumes. No telephone poles. No billboards. No cars.

“Toto, I don’t think we’re in the twenty-first century anymore,” I whispered.

I stepped out into the street, still disbelieving. A man driving a carriage said something like “Gorblimey,” and then he started yelling in what sounded like a Cockney accent. I couldn’t understand a single word he said.

Rosemary came up behind me, putting a shawl over my shoulders. She yelled back at the carriage driver, again in a language I couldn’t understand, and steered me back to Hartley Hall. I noticed one of the pale-blue suit guys was with her.

She said soothing words, trying to reassure me, but I was past hearing. I was overwhelmed by being in a situation that my mind could not comprehend, in a place I had no frame of reference for understanding.

We went back into the house, with all of the servants staring at me as Rosemary led me back up to my room. She continued talking, and I concentrated on what she was saying. “Eat your breakfast, and I’ll come and fetch you when the dressmaker’s arrived.” I nodded, and that seemed to satisfy her.

When the door closed, I got up and started to pace. This was not a dream. It was not a hallucination. This was all very, very real.

Somehow, I had time traveled. I had gone back two hundred years.

My brain seized on the memory that my Physics 215 professor had said it was impossible for time travel to occur. I couldn't believe I had nearly failed that class. That stupid professor didn't even know what he was talking about. The only reason I'd signed up for that particular class was because of my crush on Chris Reilly.

Who wouldn't even be born for another 180 years.

Feeling light-headed, I sat down on the floor, putting my head between my knees. This was real. This was happening.

But I couldn't really wrap my head around it. My mind was like a computer set to defrag its hard drive. The information was there but jumbled up and all over the place. It would take me time to line everything up and sort it out so that I could understand it.

Some still-hysterical, panicked part of my brain reminded me that this was all my fault. I'd told the guidance counselor that I wanted to see the world. I probably should have specified that I wanted to see it in my own century.

Because despite majoring in history, I'd had no desire to live through any other time period than my own. I enjoyed modern life. Electricity. Air-conditioning. Heaters. Plumbing.

Plumbing! My very full bladder reminded me that I had no idea how I was supposed to go to the bathroom here!

I went out into the hallway, and luckily enough, the first door I opened had something that resembled a toilet. I didn't know how it worked, but I made a mental note to ask Rosemary later.

When I finished, I returned to my room, closing the door behind me. I'd figure everything out, even the bathroom situation. I was a college graduate. Where, despite my physics class, I'd done very well, thank you. It had been out of necessity. I had multiple scholarships that required me to keep my grade point average up. And I quickly realized that there would be no way to do that if I partied like everyone around me. I saw too many people dropping out of school once their regular blood alcohol levels exceeded their GPAs. But with both of my parents dead and no family at all to speak of, I had to rely on myself. Get the best education I could.

I'd been at something of a loss when I graduated, trying to figure out my next step. And when the Portwood Foundation contacted me, offering to interview me for a job in London, I'd been so flattered, so excited to

finally have an objective in mind, that I hadn't stopped to consider that it seemed too good to be true. And considering I was currently sitting in a house in 1816, it obviously had been.

And curse me for not studying European or British history! What good would my training in American history do me now? As a distraction, I tried to think of what was happening in the United States in 1816. The War of 1812 was over. Who was president—Madison? Monroe? I didn't recall anything particularly eventful from that year.

But as far as distractions went, it was short-lived.

I couldn't hide out in my room forever. I had to make some plans. For now, the best thing for me would be to stay in Hartley Hall. They were under the mistaken impression that I was someone else. What had Hartley said he thought my name was? Oh, right. Emily. Emily Blythe. I wondered who Emily Blythe was and where she was. If she showed up, that would be very, very bad for me.

Because I had a vague notion of what living on the streets of London in this era would be like. My roommate my senior year had been a musical theater major, and I'd been subjected to the movie version of *Oliver!* no less than ten times. I'd enjoyed it because as an orphan like Oliver, I liked the idea of having some unknown but wealthy relative who would love me and whisk me away from it all. But what I remembered now from that story was the seedy underbelly of this city, and I realized that if they threw me out, I'd be dead inside of a week. I had been barely able to understand anything that carriage driver had said—what if I was suddenly surrounded by a sea of people speaking what essentially felt like a foreign language?

I had nowhere to go, no means of providing for myself. I was stuck. I couldn't get a job. I didn't even have any shoes! If the Earl of Hartley was willing to let me stay here, that was what I would do. For as long as I could.

Until I found a way home.

And there had to be a way home. I refused to accept any other possibility. If I went back through time, there had to be a way to go forward in time.

Logical. I had to be logical and stop freaking out, imagining cutthroats and pickpockets finishing me off when I was kicked out. I took several deep breaths, in and out. How had I arrived? There had been no magic doors, no bright lights, and I would have remembered if there had been a

big phone booth. So time machines were definitely out. Something I had done triggered this. The storm? The dress? The house?

I sat on the floor, putting my legs out straight in front of me, and leaned against the bed. I smoothed my skirt, and that action made me remember. The piece of paper. The writing. The words.

But what kind of words would cause something like this to happen?

Magic words.

I almost laughed because it was too ridiculous. I didn't believe in magic.

Or time travel.

But here I was. And nothing had happened until I read that little piece of paper. I tried to recall what I had said, but it was useless. I hadn't memorized it and couldn't remember it. It hadn't even been English.

If there were words to bring me here, there had to be words to send me back. And they had to be here in this house, somewhere. I decided there was a way home and that I would find it. It had to be written in something. A journal or a book. The logical place to start looking was the library.

Sneaking out of my room, I managed to avoid any human contact all the way down to the library. When I tried to open the door, it was locked. I let out a deep sigh, resting my forehead against the door. Of course it was locked. Because nothing was going to work the way that I wanted it to.

"Are you lost, Miss Blythe?" It was one of the young, pale-blue suit guys. The one who had helped Rosemary bring me back to the house. He was passing through the lower foyer and spotted me. "Do you need assistance in finding your room?"

"No, I'm good. Thanks." I tried smiling at him, hoping he wouldn't guess what I was up to. How I was plotting to break into Hartley's library and ransack all his reading material. "I didn't catch your name earlier."

This seemed to surprise him. He looked to his left and his right before he said in a conspiratorial voice, "It's Tommy, miss."

I held out my hand, and after a momentary hesitation he shook it. "Nice to meet you, Tommy. I'm Emma. Thanks for looking out for me."

Another shocked expression, but I did notice his chest lifting. "Of course, Miss Blythe. Should you require anything, I will be happy to assist you."

"Thanks. I appreciate it. And I, uh, I'll just be going back to my room." I hurried back as quickly as I could. Since the library was currently off-

limits, my next step was to search the closet. Maybe the piece of paper had fallen in there. But despite looking everywhere—lifting every box, going over every corner and edge in that area—I had to admit the paper was probably still sitting in the twenty-first century.

I searched my room half-heartedly, but I knew it wouldn't be there. Nothing in my life was ever that easy.

So I was staying here, for the time being. I had to hide my future stuff. It had been a a little over a hundred years since the Salem witch trials, but I wasn't taking any chances. I took my dress off, making sure to undo the sash this time, and wiggled my way out of it. I quickly took off my shirt and my jeans, pulling my phone out of the front pocket. I glanced at the screen. No bars. No surprise that cell service sucked in 1816. I turned the phone off, wanting to conserve its power. I put it back into my jeans pocket. I also took off my watch and put that in my pocket as well. I looked at my underwear. I had no idea what they wore here. But better to have nothing than a strange bra and panties that would freak them out. I took those off, too, and shoved everything into the drawer next to the bed. Given how many people I'd seen in this house already, I'd have to find a more secure location later. This would do for now.

I got the dress back on, and not a moment too soon. There was a scratching noise that sounded a bit like a rat gnawing on a wall, and as I started working myself up into a frenzy over that idea, someone called out, "Miss Blythe?" and my bedroom door opened. I jumped, my pulse frantically thumping away.

Putting my hand over my heart, I said, "Rosemary. You scared me."

"My apologies, miss. The dressmaker's arrived. She's downstairs in the drawing room."

Seeing my opportunity I asked, "Quick question—is there somewhere that I can keep my personal things safe?"

She pushed her shoulders back, giving me a bewildered look. "No one in this house is a thief."

"Oh!" I hadn't realized how that might come across. "I didn't mean to imply that. I'm just a private person." There was no way to explain that I had to keep my electronics and factory-produced clothing away from anyone who might be tempted to snoop. And I so wouldn't put it past the housekeeper.

She seemed slightly mollified. “I believe your desk has some locked drawers. I will have to get the key from Mrs. Farnsworth.” She must have noticed my raised eyebrows. “She keeps all the house keys on a ring on her belt.”

Good to know. For when I planned on stealing the library key later. First I’d have to figure out a way to get her to unlock the door for me so that I knew which one to take.

“I will ask her while you’re having your fitting. Although I’m not certain she’ll like it.” She glanced up at me in surprise, as if she hadn’t intended to say the last part out loud.

And I couldn’t tell her that I knew from experience that Mrs. Farnsworth didn’t like anything.

With a tentative plan in place and a means of protecting myself from immediate discovery, I breathed a sigh of relief as I followed Rosemary downstairs to find a smiling, happy middle-aged woman standing in the middle of a small army. The drawing room itself made me stop and stare before I entered. I didn’t know what you would call this decorating style, but the room was both comforting and ridiculously expensive looking. Someone had kept the theme I’d seen in the servants’ uniforms by using shades of pale blue and silver, with a sparkly, massive chandelier hanging in the center, some Grecian sculptures, and antique furniture that looked like it would break if I sat on it. Although, I didn’t know if they were actually antiques. They could have bought everything last week. It could be “modern” furniture.

It was all very confusing.

“I am Madame Descoteaux. Lord Hartley retained me to outfit you.” Her hair must have been a more vibrant color when she was younger, but now it was a very pale brown. I wondered if she dyed it. Did they have hair dye?

“Hey. I’m Emma. Are you Irish?” I asked. She had an Irish accent and didn’t sound even a little French, despite the name.

“All the best mantua-makers are French,” she said with a laugh. “Even if they aren’t.”

“French is in?” I asked, and then at her confused expression corrected myself. “Or what’s popular?”

“*Oui*,” she replied with a wink. She directed me to stand on a platform, and then her henchmen descended on me like a swarm of locusts. There

was the guy who made the shoes, and I heard words like “kid slippers” and “half boots” as he traced my feet on paper. Other people were taking measurements and holding papers against me as they made patterns.

If I were in a movie, this would have been the montage scene as they poked and prodded me, debating among themselves what materials and fabrics to use in order to make me fabulous enough for the high school quarterback.

“Your dress, although currently fashionable, seems old somehow,” Madame remarked. She had no idea. It had been sitting in a box for two hundred years. She barely lifted my skirt and gasped. Her wide eyes let me know that I had shocked her with my bare legs. I didn’t think she had seen anything she shouldn’t, but apparently I was missing something down there.

Before I could say anything, she stood up and touched my waist, and more shock. “Where is your corset? We’ve been measuring you with the idea that you were wearing one.”

“It’s the American style,” I told her with a shrug, praying she’d buy it. She started barking orders about changing the measurements and getting corsets and petticoats and chemises and wrappers and night rails and lots of other words I didn’t recognize.

This was when Rosemary returned, key in hand. She had a quick conference with Madame Descoteaux, and as the Madame’s entourage left, Rosemary informed me that they would send over some things they had on hand, adding material to the bottoms to make them long enough.

We went back to my room, and she gave me the key. I asked her why Mrs. Farnsworth had it, and it led to a whole discussion of who was who in the household and the servants’ hierarchy. Stephens was the butler, and he and Mrs. Farnsworth were at the top of the food chain.

She also didn’t understand why I didn’t know anything about how the system worked. “I didn’t have any . . .” Her mouth had dropped open when I said I didn’t have any servants, so I hastily tried to fix it. “I meant, we didn’t have many servants. Nothing like this.”

“You should see Rosewood. The country estate. They have even more servants there. I’m only a housemaid myself, but I’ve ambitions to be a lady’s maid, which is why Mrs. Farnsworth allowed me to assist you. I’ve been practicing coiffures on the other girls, and I’m hoping that if I please you during your stay, you’ll give me a letter of reference before you go.”

“Sure,” I agreed. I didn’t know what that meant, but I assumed eventually I would figure it out. “As long as you tell me one more thing. How does the bathroom situation work?”

CHAPTER FIVE

THINGS I'M GOING TO INVENT IF I GET STUCK IN 1816

Toilet paper

Rosemary didn't know what a bathroom was, and we were both red-faced by the time I managed to make myself understood. She explained the toilet to me (calling it a Bramah) in the "water closet" I'd used next to my room, bragging about how few households had such a thing.

"What about showering?" I asked.

"Showering?"

Right. No showers. "Um, getting clean. Bathing?"

"We can bring a bath up for you, if you'd like." She went on to explain that it would involve a bathtub being hauled up to my room, with servants bringing up hot water to pour into it. It gave a whole new meaning to "running water." And it sounded like a lot of work.

"How often do people do that? Order baths?"

"It depends on the person, I suppose. Lord Hartley bathes fairly often."

Now that was a mental image I did not need. I actually shook my head, telling it to get out.

She showed me where I could perform something she called "ablutions," and there was a bowl of water, a pitcher, washcloths, and what I could only assume was soap. "You can wash yourself here every morning," she said. I looked over the other things on the table and hoped that there were 1816 equivalents for toothpaste and deodorant.

Rosemary promised to return, and I was eager to investigate, so I said I'd see her later. But after I finished guessing what each ancient hygiene product was used for, I was bored. I was tempted to pull out my phone and play a game but didn't want to waste the battery.

How on earth was I supposed to entertain myself?

There was some heavy paper on the desk situated near the door, what looked like a quill, and a bottle of what turned out to be ink. I decided to

try and figure out how to use it, which resulted in little writing but so many massive blots that my paper looked like a Rorschach test.

When Rosemary came back, I was so glad to see another person I had to refrain from hugging her. She brought in several packages and offered to help me change. “I don’t have anything on. Underneath,” I explained. I didn’t need her passing out from the shock. Hartley and Matt had been freaked out by my bare feet. I was worried a naked body might make someone go into hysterics.

After assuring me that she’d be fine, I got my dress off, and she quickly slipped on some kind of undergarment that was like a really long slip. She held up a bustier. Corset, I corrected myself. She called them stays. I stepped into it, and then the torture began.

She strapped me into that thing, restricting my rib cage. “I can’t breathe,” I complained when she indicated that she had finished.

“Perfect, then,” she pronounced.

I put my hand over my stomach. “How do you sit down in one of these?” I tried to sit on the bed and had to do it very carefully. It was super uncomfortable.

“You act as if you’ve never worn one,” she said in a teasing tone.

“I haven’t,” I admitted, before I could catch myself. More shocked face. I really had to be more careful about what I said to people here. “We’re very liberal in America. I come from a super blue state.”

Rosemary, who probably had no idea what I was talking about but was polite enough not to ask, instructed me to stand so that she could finish helping me dress. That led to more layers of clothes but no actual underwear. I didn’t know how to ask about that. I guessed I was just supposed to go commando. She put on a pale pink “day dress,” as she called it, and had me sit down so that she could style my hair.

After what seemed like hours, I was finally allowed to get a look at myself. Even if my corset was a torture device that had obviously been designed by a man, my boobs looked fantastic. And I could get used to this high-waist-on-dresses thing. It hid all of my flaws. I didn’t normally wear my hair up, but I liked how it looked. “You did a really good job,” I said.

Then I got to put on a pair of shoes that were too small. They were the biggest size the shoemaker had, and he would send over more when he had my shoes finished. But these reminded me of ballet flats, and I was glad

that finally somebody understood that tall women did not necessarily want to be even taller by wearing heels.

"Now what?" I asked.

She seemed confused by my question. "What do you mean, miss?"

"Now what do I do since I'm all dressed up?"

She continued to look baffled. "What do you do at home?"

There was no way for me to explain what I normally did at home without getting carted off to the loony bin. "Things are very different here. What do you think I should do for the next three days?"

* * *

What I did was explore the mansion, except for the one room I most wanted access to. I even went so far as to ask Mrs. Farnsworth if I could go into the library to find some books to read, but she frostily refused, saying that it was Lord Hartley's private study and that I could wait for his return.

A return I was both looking forward to and dreading. I wanted to see him and all his sexiness again, but what if he had figured out that I was not who he thought I was?

The first night I slept in the closet in the old dress, hopeful that I might wake up back in my own time. Rosemary found me there and asked in a confused voice, "Wouldn't you prefer the bed, miss?"

I did prefer the bed, and what I loved most about sleeping was that I got to take the stupid corset off. At least part of my day was spent ensuring that my red blood cells got enough oxygen. Usually it took me a while to get used to sleeping in a new place. Despite spending my entire life waking up in one foster home and going to sleep in another, I'd never developed that cope-with-strange-new-environments gene. When I'd first moved to London, it had taken me almost two weeks to not freak out every time I woke up.

But despite my bizarre situation, it didn't happen here. Weirdly enough, I felt at home almost immediately and slept like a baby every night.

Which gave me a lot of energy that I had no way to burn off. I wasn't allowed to go outside by myself, and the backyard wasn't very big. I knew my way around the house, so I started dedicating part of my day to meeting the staff and had a fun time learning their names and their

responsibilities. Nobody seemed too keen on having a conversation with me, keeping their eyes averted and looking like all they wanted to do was get back to their work. Rosemary spent as much time with me as she could entertaining me. I learned that she was the youngest of five girls, all of whom had gone into “service,” as she called it. She was from the country, and while the rest had settled for being housemaids or kitchen maids, she had higher aspirations. I could get behind a girl with ambition. I decided to do whatever I could to help her.

All my new clothes and shoes arrived, and it was like Christmas. There were packages everywhere and all sorts of things to try on. I had my own mini–fashion show, which was a lot more boring than it sounds, especially since I had no one to show it off to.

Both baths and meals were brought to me in my room. The shampoo and soap were weird, as was the food. Fortunately, I had a pretty adventurous palate and tried everything. Some of it was better than others. I felt bad for the extra effort they had to go through to feed me and told Rosemary that I could just join the servants in the kitchen when they ate. Her scandalized expression told me that I’d again made a mistake. “Or this is fine,” I tacked on as quickly as I could.

I’d never realized how dependent I’d been on my electronics to constantly amuse me. I always had something to read, watch, or listen to every minute of every day. Having to be without that felt a little like withdrawal. And I just didn’t know what to do with myself.

Fortunately, my circumstances were about to change. As I sat in my room, still trying to figure out how I was supposed to write with a feather, I heard that scratching on my door that I now knew was one of the servants. I didn’t know why they didn’t just knock, but I’d become accustomed to it.

I opened the door. “Hey, Roger. What’s going on?”

The footman smiled at me. “Lord Hartley wishes to see you.”

My heart actually leaped into my throat, lodging there. I could see that my hands were trembling. Whether that was from apprehension or excitement, I wasn’t sure. “Okay.” I stepped out into the hallway, but I didn’t see him. “Where is he?”

“He is downstairs in the library, miss.” Roger stood there expectantly. “He doesn’t like to be kept waiting.”

“Then why didn’t he come up here to see me?”

Roger blinked a few times, confused. “You are to go to him. I can escort you, if you’d like.”

“No escorting necessary. I know where it is. Thanks, though.”

“My pleasure, Miss Blythe.” With a nod and slight bow, Roger walked off in the opposite direction. I headed downstairs faster than I’d meant to. Part of me wanted to make Hartley wait, seeing as how he’d made me wait three whole days to see him again.

But the other part of me was desperate to see him again. To drink in his ridiculous gorgeousness. So far, despite his grouchiness, he had been my favorite part of traveling through time.

When I stepped into the hallway, Stephens was there, carrying a tray. I nearly collided with him but jumped back just in time. So did he. Which caused him to throw a shoulder into a nearby pillar. Before either one of us could react, the vase sitting on top of it wobbled dangerously back and forth and then tumbled to the floor.

Where it shattered into a million pieces.

Some of his perfectly combed silver hair fell onto his forehead, and the look of fear and heartbreak was unmistakable on Stephens’s lined face. He was totally devastated. Was he worried about being fired? Was the vase special?

Hartley came out into the hall. I had only a second to admire him before he asked in a low, dangerous tone, “What the devil is going on?”

“You’re back,” I said pathetically.

Hartley gave me a look that let me know I’d really stated the obvious. “Just as I said I would be. I am a man of my word. And I beg your pardon, but what happened to the vase?”

“My l-lord,” Stephens stammered. “I-I know this was a gift from Miss Amesbury . . .”

At the mention of that name, something happened to Hartley. The look on his face matched Stephens’s expression. Like his heart was hurting. Who was Miss Amesbury? And what did she do to make Hartley react like that?

Intriguing and mysterious. And I felt a surprising amount of jealousy. I shouldn’t have felt so proprietary over him, but I didn’t like his reaction.

“I’m so sorry!” I said loudly, causing both men to look at me. “I am such a klutz. I wasn’t looking where I was going and tripped over my own feet. I didn’t mean to knock it over. I’ll help clean it up.” I bent down,

putting shards into my open hand. I glanced up at Stephens and saw gratitude in his warm brown eyes.

"It's fine," Hartley said through gritted teeth. "Please, I would like to speak with you in the library. Stephens, can you make certain this is taken care of?" He went back into the library, not waiting for his butler's reply.

"Of course, my lord." Stephens held out his tray, and I put the shards I'd picked up on top of it. I heard a soft "Thank you" as I walked past him.

It was easy to take the blame. I hoped I wouldn't be around for very long, and I figured better me than Stephens.

I was actually feeling pretty good at having helped someone. It was the first time since I'd arrived that I'd been able to. Hartley stood behind his large desk, with papers and books spread open around him. I walked over to one of the chairs placed just in front of him. I was more used to the corset, but it was still restricting my movements, and I didn't want to make a fool of myself in front of him.

Because he was even better than I remembered. I wanted to sigh just from being near him. He was still so perfect looking. My heart fluttered happily in my chest, and my hands still trembled slightly. So pretty. I wondered what he thought of me. Now that I was done up and era appropriate.

I tried clearing my throat, wanting to come up with something witty to impress him or make him laugh. Or fish for a compliment.

But before I could win him over with my brilliant wordplay, he looked up at me with those clear, beautiful blue eyes, and I froze. My mind turned to mush, and my tongue actually stopped working.

"I thought we should have a discussion about why you are here."

That would be helpful. Because I had no idea who Miss Blythe was or why Hartley would let her stay in the house. "That sounds good."

Gesturing toward one of the chairs in front of his desk, he said, "Please, be seated."

And I tried to be graceful and elegant, but stymied by the infernal corset, I was veering into lumbering elephant territory. I carefully backed onto the chair, feeling a little like one of those crane games, hovering and adjusting myself to land in just the right spot. It didn't help matters that he stood behind his desk, watching me. Once I was finally in the seat, he sat down, too.

He leaned back in his chair, folding his hands across his stomach as he watched me. Did guys here work out? Did he have washboard abs under all those layers? I bet he did. He certainly had broad shoulders and big arms. And strong hands. I fanned my face. I was starting to feel feverish.

"How much did your father tell you?"

"My father is . . ." I sucked in a sharp breath, not finishing my sentence. My brain had been so distracted by his beauty that I'd nearly said my father was dead. But Miss Blythe's father was obviously very much alive. "He didn't tell me anything."

His hands flew apart as he leaned forward. "He just put you on a boat bound for England and told you nothing else?" Hartley sounded surprised and skeptical, but I needed as much information as I could get.

"Pretty much. Er, I mean, yes."

Now he looked uncomfortable. Embarrassed, even. He drummed the fingers of his left hand against his desk. "Your father and I met on a ship coming back from the West Indies. I was there to check on some of our investments, and we met while playing cards. Your father is a terrible player and quickly lost an enormous sum. One he knew he would be unable to pay back. We struck a deal. I would cover his debt, and in return he would send you here. To me."

What? I could feel my eyebrows shoot up in surprise. "Are you saying that man sold me to you?" My voice sounded really high and thin. Was I like a prostitute? He was about to be super disappointed if that was the case. Because hot or not, I was not going to have sex with him. "What kind of father sells his daughter?"

"He did not sell you. We made an arrangement that was mutually beneficial. He told me that he was a professor of botany and that you were equally interested in plants, and I thought you would make an excellent bride for my brother."

His brother? Bride? What?

Hartley had to have seen my total shock and confusion. "You truly did not know any of this?"

I shook my head slowly from side to side. I hoped that meant "no" here. I desperately needed some clarification. "You want me to marry your brother. Why?"

"There must be an heir."

An heir to what? His title? His home? “You’re the earl. Aren’t you supposed to have the heir?”

“I will never marry.” There was a scary seriousness and finality to his announcement. I wondered whether that Miss Amesbury had anything to do with his decision. “And since my brother does intend to marry, he will be the one to produce an heir. And at the moment, he has taken an interest in a rather . . . unsuitable young woman.”

She must have been awful if Hartley was willing to ship over some girl from America that he’d never even met. “You’re pimping out your brother? Expecting to breed him? Like a horse?”

“You mistook me. I did not say . . .”

“And you brought me here to be his breeding partner?”

His ran a finger along the top of the white knot around his neck, pulling it away from his skin. “I would never have put it so indelicately, but that would be the general idea once you are wed.” He put some emphasis on the last few words. Like me being forced to marry someone I’d never laid eyes on made everything else better.

Since everything he was saying annoyed me, I had to admit that some perverse part of me enjoyed making him uncomfortable. Poking at him gave me a small amount of satisfaction. But I wasn’t stupid enough to keep poking a bear and not expect to get my hand bitten off.

“But I don’t love your brother. How can you expect me to marry him? What if I don’t even like him?”

He raised one eyebrow. It was so cool. I’d always wished I could do that. Then he added a wry smile that despite my anger made my heart go gooey. “Everyone likes my brother. Love has nothing to do with it. This is about the most practical arrangement. As marriages always are. James need not love you. Only be intrigued enough by you to wish to marry you. Given that you’re American and a fellow plant lover, I don’t imagine your task to win him over will be too difficult. And I will assist in any way that I can.”

Sharing a scheme with Hartley sounded like it had possibilities. But I didn’t want to marry this James. It all sounded medieval and horrible. Like I was somebody’s property to be sold. I felt indignant on Miss Emily Blythe’s behalf. I probably should have been trying harder to see this from Hartley’s point of view, but I couldn’t stick my head that far up my butt.

I was about to tell him what he could do with his plans to wrap me up and give me to his brother like a birthday present when I forced my mouth

shut. I had to stay quiet. I had to play along. I'd already considered what would happen if Hartley kicked me out. I was stuck. I had to convince him to keep me around and had to play along with whatever stupid idea he had until I could figure out how to get home. Staying alive and, well, comfortable, was my number one priority.

Even if it meant I'd have to do what Hartley wanted and somehow manage to make this James fall in love with me. Which I had no idea how to accomplish seeing as how so far I hadn't convinced anybody to fall in love with me. I was fairly certain that there were no copies of *The Rules* in 1816.

So many things could go wrong. Emily Blythe would eventually show up. At some point this was all going to blow up in my face. But I couldn't think about it or else it would overwhelm me. I would take this one day at a time. And hopefully get back to my own century before anyone discovered the truth.

On the plus side, unless James was some kind of genetically mutated troll, odds were good that he looked something like Hartley, so at least that part would be enjoyable.

Trying my best to keep my temper in check, I showed Hartley my clenched teeth in a facsimile of a smile. "Basically, this is what you want. And you always get what you want."

He must have heard the challenge in my voice, because the small half smile was back. "I don't recall any recent defeats."

"Which means that there are defeats which aren't recent."

That made his smile widen, but he didn't answer. I had expected him to be upset, but instead, he seemed amused. I sucked in a breath, instructing my body to stop responding to how much more gorgeous he became when he smiled.

Which I was failing at miserably. As a distraction, I decided to take advantage of this rare good mood.

"There's something I need to know."

CHAPTER SIX

THINGS I'M GOING TO INVENT IF I GET STUCK IN 1816

Bras and underwear

She was annoyed with him. Hartley could tell. With the exception of his sisters, women were never cross with him. He should have been annoyed in turn, but instead he found it infinitely delightful. She had spirit, which he appreciated. Her anger caused her cheeks to flush and her chest to rise rapidly up and down, making her even more attractive. He wondered whether she would have boarded the ship in Boston if she'd known the truth about the arrangement. He suspected not. "And what is it that you wish to know?"

Miss Blythe scooted to the end of her wingback chair, leaning forward slightly, as if beckoning him closer. He wondered if she realized what she was doing. He took in her appearance—so changed from their first meeting. Now that she had been properly outfitted and coiffed, she was even more beautiful than he had initially imagined. She lacked the innate grace or elegance that he was accustomed to, but that somehow made her even more appealing. She wasn't practiced or studied. She was simply herself, and he was finding it rather intriguing.

He cleared his throat, reminding himself that she wasn't his to be intrigued by.

"What am I supposed to be doing all day?" she asked.

Such an odd question, and not at all what he expected. He wasn't often surprised, as he'd found most people's behavior was generally easy to predict. Not so with Miss Blythe. She had managed to surprise him on both occasions that they'd spoken. He wasn't quite sure how to answer. "Whatever it is that women do all day."

"Which is what, exactly?"

At first, Hartley thought she might be joking with him. But he saw now that she was quite serious. It confused him. "What did you do in Boston?"

She twisted her soft lips to the side, averting her eyes. “It’s complicated to explain. But it’s different here than it was there. I’m not sure what I’m supposed to be doing.” Her eyes, which reminded him of the greenest grass in summer, flitted up to meet his. “What do you do all day?”

“I manage my estates, go to my club, attend social gatherings, eat, dress.” It was odd to sum up one’s daily life so succinctly.

“Maybe I could help you with that,” she offered.

“You wish to help me dress?” he asked, not able to keep the amusement from his voice. It conjured up images he should not and could not think, so he immediately dismissed them. He did note, however, how prettily she blushed at his comment. “I have a valet for that purpose.”

“That wasn’t what I meant. I meant I could help you manage your estates.”

He couldn’t think of a single woman of his acquaintance who knew or cared anything about running an estate. “And how, exactly, do you propose to do that?”

She stood up, and he did likewise. Miss Blythe walked over to him, standing entirely too close as she looked at his accounting books on his desk. “What are you doing now?”

Giving into a momentary weakness, he closed his eyes as he detected the faintest scent of rosewater. She must have washed her hair recently. Forcing his eyes back open, he took half a step away from her. “I am going over the books from Rosewood. The ones my estate manager keeps, ensuring their accuracy.”

“Don’t you have a bookkeeper or accountant for that?”

Initially he had thought her skin to be pure and fair, but this close he noticed several freckles across her nose. He found them rather endearing. He shook his head, as if he could banish his unwanted observations. “My father was cheated out of most of his fortune, and I intend to make certain the same doesn’t happen to me.” He had sacrificed too much to gain the money back.

Half expecting her to ask further invasive questions, he was surprised when she didn’t push the issue. “I can definitely help you with that. I have this thing with numbers.”

“Thing?”

She glanced at the page, still standing too close for him to be at ease. “Three thousand two hundred and twenty-six.”

“What?”

Her green eyes danced with merriment. “That’s the total. Three thousand two hundred and twenty-six.”

Looking down at the page she pointed to, he grabbed the paper under the book. He had come to the same conclusion, only it had taken him a great deal longer, checking and rechecking. She again astonished him. “You did all those sums just now in your head?”

“It’s just something I’ve always been able to do. I was thinking about majoring in math in college, but I loved history more. American history. So I minored in math instead.”

It seemed an odd subject to study, given that she had been alive for most of America’s so-called history. This did not fit at all with the image he’d had in his mind after his agreement with her father. “I thought you were interested in botany.”

Her eyes went wide, her expressive eyebrows climbing up her forehead. “Oh! Of course. Yeah. I totally love botany, too.”

“And you’re saying you went to university, as well?”

She took a step back. “Yeah. I mean, yes?” Her voice rose at the end, as if she were asking a question rather than answering one. Was she prevaricating? Because there was an unmistakable frantic look of panic in her eyes. “Didn’t you say my, um, father was a professor?”

Another bizarre question. “Yes.”

“He let me go. He wanted me to have an education.” That frantic looked consumed her features. “I didn’t get a degree or anything because that won’t happen for . . . anyway, I just got to go to class and stuff and pretend like I would graduate.”

Whilst he noted the faintest trace of sarcasm, what she said did make some sense. From the short time that he’d known him, Professor Blythe had seemed very dedicated to education. It didn’t surprise him too much that the professor had let his daughter attend classes, presumably with her chaperone.

And she was obviously much more intelligent than he had initially imagined. Some men would find that repugnant, but he was sure James would appreciate it. Hartley himself had always much preferred the company of smart and clever women to the vacuous sort the *ton* was fond of raising.

“While I appreciate the offer, I am capable of handling my own affairs, thank you.”

“Whatever. Just thought I’d help out.” She headed over to the bookshelves and began to run her fingers across the spines of the books. “Can I at least read? Do you guys let women read? Or are you worried it will hurt my brain or something?”

“By all means, help yourself to whatever books you’d like, Miss Blythe.”

That made her stop and look at him. “Seeing as how I didn’t play high school sports, I’ve never had the chance to get used to someone calling me by my last name. It’s weird. You can just call me Emma.”

His heart beat a little faster. “No, I cannot.” She couldn’t be serious, offering to let him call her by her Christian name. That indicated a familiarity and intimacy that existed only between family members, betrothed couples, and spouses.

“Why not?”

“It would be . . . unseemly.”

She gave him a strange look and then pulled four books from the shelves. “Where I’m from everyone calls me Emma. It’s okay if you want to.”

Some part of him did want to. That was the problem. “I shan’t be doing so.”

“Okay. Suit yourself.” She held up one of the tomes she had selected. “I’m going to go get started on this. I’ll see you around.”

She had made it nearly to the doorway when he regained his ability to speak. “Wait, Miss Blythe! There is one other thing.”

Miss Blythe paused, and he glanced down at the invitation on his desk. The one he had meant to refuse but had forgotten. He would have been hard-pressed to explain his out-of-character behavior. Not only in his conversation and interest in her but now in looking for an excuse to prolong their encounter. “There is a ball this evening that we should attend.”

She went very still. “Are you asking me out on a date?” Her voice was little more than a whisper.

A date? “What does fruit have to do with this situation?”

Where a moment earlier she had been the very essence of quiet, now her entire body seemed to shimmer with a barely contained excitement. “I

don’t know what you call them here. But you want me to go with you to a ball. A real-life ball. Where we’ll dance and dress up and everything? Seriously?”

“I am always serious, Miss Blythe.” Why was she questioning his intent?

“You always keep your word, and you’re always serious. Got it,” she said in a breathy tone. “But a ball! How cool is that?” He didn’t know why she thought the temperature would be involved, but her obvious joy at the prospect of attending something as routine and simple as a ball was affecting him more than it should have. He was glad he had asked her.

And truth be told, he wanted to see her in a ball gown.

“What time will you, you know, pick me up?”

He knit his eyebrows in confusion.

“I mean, what time will we leave here?”

Even with her chaperone, the idea of being in a carriage with Miss Blythe, in such close proximity and darkness, made his mouth go dry. Which was both unsettling and ridiculous. He should not be thinking of his brother’s soon-to-be betrothed in this manner. He had to keep their relationship formal.

Clearing his throat, he said, “I shall have to meet you there.” He simply could not accompany her. He couldn’t practically be alone with her, much as he was now. He couldn’t notice things about her or appreciate her attributes. He had no choice but to keep her at arm’s length. “I have a prior engagement, and as such, I shall take my leave of you.”

“You’re taking what?”

Hartley had not encountered these sort of language difficulties with Professor Blythe, but his daughter seemed to speak a foreign tongue. Where half the time he couldn’t understand her, and she couldn’t understand him. “My leave. I’m leaving.”

He brushed past her, holding his breath as he did so, refusing to let her tempt him further.

“So I’ll just see you there?” Now her excitement had turned to disappointment. He wasn’t certain why that made him want to stop, turn, and soothe her until she felt better.

“It seems inevitable, doesn’t it?” he retorted instead, determined to establish the boundaries that they both had to operate within. “You and

your chaperone will be given the proper instructions on where to go. Until this evening."

He made her a bow, not noticing that she didn't curtsy in return. He heard her say, "But I don't . . ." as he walked through the front door, but he didn't stay to listen to the rest of her sentence.

Hartley had no prior engagement. He had to escape his home before he did something foolish. He hailed a carriage and made his way to White's, needing to leave his own team behind for Miss Blythe's use. He spent his afternoon neglecting his duties by playing cards and sending messages to his valet and butler to make arrangements. He hoped his time away would give him some clarity and help him to rebalance his priorities.

A waiter approached, but Hartley waved him away. He wanted to drink, but he needed to retain his wits, and copious amounts of alcohol would not accomplish that. He'd had every intention of using this time to clear his mind, to not think of her. It backfired spectacularly, and he spent hours considering Miss Blythe and her profound and unexpected effect on him. He thought particularly of what it was that he liked about her, in spite of himself. There was her beauty, her ability to surprise him, her intelligence.

But the thing he suspected that he liked most was that she didn't treat him as if he were some sort of prize to be won. She didn't simper or attempt to catch his eye or scheme to trap him into marriage. She seemed not to care for his title or his wealth. She was simply herself and often acted as if she could barely tolerate him. As if he held no charms for her.

Which excited him. She was like a clever vixen on a hunt, one determined not to be caught. He'd never been able to resist a challenge, and she presented an insurmountable one.

Because despite her belief that Hartley got everything that he wanted, in this case it could not be true. He had a specific purpose and use for her, and he couldn't afford to let anything distract him from that goal.

He didn't get everything that he wanted. At the moment, he wanted Miss Blythe.

And she was the one person he could never have.

* * *

A date! A real, actual date, and to a ball no less! I briefly recalled my words to Bex about marrying the next guy who asked me out but decided it

didn’t apply to men who had been dead for over a hundred years by the time I was born.

I seriously missed overhead lights and showers, but a ball I could get behind. I ran for Rosemary, and she was every bit as excited as I was. We picked out a soft teal dress that had a silver-and-white lace overlay, and Rosemary told me to sit down so that she could fix my hair.

“We’ve no jewels,” she murmured to herself. She rang the servant bell and had one of the footmen come up. It was Tommy. She instructed him to go to the conservatory and pick some kind of flower and bring it back to her in about an hour. She missed the longing look in his eyes, as she was too busy messing with my hair. Interesting. Maybe I could help those two crazy kids get together before I left. But then Rosemary started wielding something she called curling tongs, and all my matchmaking thoughts fled as I suspected my hair was going to catch on fire any minute.

It didn’t, and as she finished up with the aroma of slightly burned hair all around us, Tommy returned with little white flowers, and she used pins to stick them into my elaborate updo.

After he left, Rosemary insisted on pulling my corset even tighter, which made me feel faint. But I would suffer like a good soldier of beauty and look amazing. She helped me get my dress on, along with my nylons and my shoes, and then let me look. “Oh wow,” I said. She was a genius. “You are getting the best reference letter ever!” I actually touched the mirror to make sure the reflection was me.

She grinned behind me, obviously pleased with herself. “When are you and Lord Hartley leaving?”

“I’m supposed to meet him,” I said. I assumed Stephens would know where. “But there’s one problem. He thinks I have a chaperone, and I don’t have a chaperone.”

“I can accompany you,” she offered. “I will have to let Mrs. Farnsworth know, and I’ll convince a couple of the footmen to come along with us. That should be fine.”

Rosemary offered to find out more details about the where and when and left me alone in my room. Where I began to imagine Hartley and I dancing at our ball.

Only, I didn’t know how to dance.

Problem.

Maybe I could fake an injury? Or tell him I wanted to sit this one out? If I danced with him or anybody else, I would make a total fool of myself.

Why was everything in 1816 so freaking complicated?

I would figure out some sort of excuse. I had to. I considered telling Rosemary I was too sick to go, but I wanted to go to the ball. Maybe I had some kind of latent Cinderella complex.

Trying to calm down, I picked up one of the books I'd taken earlier from Hartley's study. But the words swam on the page. I couldn't concentrate. I was both excited and terrified. I didn't want to embarrass him or me.

Rosemary returned, having changed her clothes and her hair, and told me it was time to go. She offered me a lace shawl in case I got cold. Because it was raining outside. Again.

The footmen held umbrellas for us as we climbed into the carriage. A carriage, just like Cinderella! With white horses and everything!

Without my watch, I had no idea how long it took for us to arrive at the ball. It felt short, but that was probably due to my combination terror/giddiness. The rain had briefly let up, and I saw Hartley pacing on the sidewalk outside of the mansion, where every window was lit up and the sounds of music and laughter spilled out onto the street. He had changed into a different outfit—he had on a very dark blue suit coat and light pants, along with his boots. I was kind of becoming a fan of the boots. He looked scrumptious.

The carriage came to a halt, and Hartley reached up to help me get out. I didn't need his help, but I wasn't going to say no to kind of holding hands, even if it was for a second. He seemed distracted. "Is that your abigail?"

"My what?"

"Your lady's maid." He sounded impatient.

"Oh, no, her name is Rosemary. Not Abigail." His gaze was directed toward the house and not at me. So I went full pathetic. I fished for a compliment. "What do you think of my dress?" I asked as I twirled around. My skirt didn't go out very far. "I feel like such a girl in it." I mean, other than the death trap strapped around my ribs.

He did not take the bait. "That's excellent, considering you are one. We should go inside." He held out his arm for me to take. Despite his total-lack-of-compliment game, it still felt so romantic to walk like this.

Inside the house there were ten million people. I think the entire population of London was trying to cram itself inside of one house. We

could barely move through the front foyer, but then we made it to the ballroom, where the crowd let up.

I couldn't help but gasp. There was a bright, polished wooden floor and dozens of chandeliers that hung overhead, all lit up with individual candles. A small group of musicians played in one corner, and there were beautiful silks and jewels on the women and an array of formal wear on the men. A few of the older guys wore capri-type pants that went only to their knees.

It was so beautiful and amazing and everything that I had ever imagined a real ball would be. "Holy cow. It's like a fairy tale."

"I'd never considered anything of the bovine persuasion particularly sacred, but I shall take your word for it. And no ball I have ever been to was much like a fairy tale."

I didn't care what Hartley thought. He was not going to rain on my parade.

CHAPTER SEVEN

THINGS I'M GOING TO INVENT IF I GET STUCK IN 1816

Central air/heating

The next thing I noticed was how tiny all the women here seemed to be. I was like Gulliver in Lilliput. Dorothy with the Lollipop Guild. Me at my first junior high dance. I was literally the tallest girl here. I sort of towered over all the women, and most of the men.

A dance began, and the men and women lined up. I'd had a friend freshman year who'd been a big country music fan, but this was a very different sort of line dancing. I was lost after a few seconds. There was definitely no way I could dance.

"Come, let me introduce you to our hosts," Hartley said, leading me around the exterior of the dance floor. I was glad that Rosemary had insisted I bring a fan. I opened it as I followed behind Hartley, trying to cool down. Despite the windows and balcony doors being open, there were so many people in the room that it was quickly starting to feel like a sauna.

Near the open doors stood a middle-aged couple flanking a girl so tiny I could have put her in my pocket. Hartley started making introductions, and I held out my hand to the older man. He took it, and I shook, which seemed to startle him. He bowed over my hand, which was weird, and I removed it from his grasp.

I could feel the sweat running in beads down my back. What I would have given for some air-conditioning! The tiny girl was named Lady Katherine Darlington. I noticed that she looked at Hartley the way a woman on a cleanse looked at a chocolate triple-layer cake.

All three of the Darlingtons were giving me the evil eye. I wondered what I'd done wrong. I pulled a sweaty tendril away from my forehead. I noticed nobody else seemed uncomfortable.

The mother, who had probably been beautiful once, rapped Hartley playfully on the arm with her fan. Ugh. Cougar flirting was gross. "You

didn’t respond to our invitation.”

“Not an oversight, I assure you,” he said under his breath, so that only I could hear him. I tried really hard not to laugh. I figured he probably had only meant to think it, not say it. “Time slipped away from me, I’m afraid. My apologies.”

“None are necessary. Your presence here makes up for any fault,” the mom responded, batting her lashes at Hartley. Then why even bring it up? “Although I suppose you could make amends by saving a dance for our Kitty,” the mom said.

Whoa, Kitty alert! Remembering my discussion with Bex, I decided not to jump to any name-ist conclusions. Maybe she was a nice Kitty. Like Hello Kitty. I mean, like my favorite cartoon character, this Kitty even had a pink bow over one ear, nestled among short white-blonde curls.

“It would be an honor,” Hartley said in a clipped voice. He didn’t sound like it would be an honor. He sounded like he would be facing a firing squad at dawn. At his response, Kitty narrowed her eyes at me.

“Such a pleasure to make your acquaintance,” she said. I wondered if I was the only person who could hear the sarcasm in her tone. She was one of those. A mean girl. In my time period she’d probably be an alcoholic cheerleader with a cheating boyfriend. Not a nice Kitty. “You are remarkably tall.”

Thanks, Captain Obvious. I got the fact that, next to her, I was like Brienne of Tarth.

“How difficult that must be for you,” she continued. “To appear so much like a man.” She said it sweetly, with a smile on her face, and I was stunned. Weren’t these guys all about manners and appearance? She was clearly insulting me.

It got worse.

“I’d heard rumors that Lord Hartley had a woman visiting his home. To think that I was actually concerned!” She had one of those tinkling laughs, like wind chimes. I still wanted to kick her right in her tea and biscuits.

She wanted Hartley, and she didn’t like that I was with him. “Listen up, Smurfette . . .”

Before I could finish, Hartley had me by the elbow, making excuses and dragging me off. I heard Kitty’s mother say, “Come now, darling. Sheath your claws.” Only she sounded like it amused her. Which aggravated me further.

I jerked my arm away from Hartley. “What did you do that for?”

“Even a blind man could see where you were heading.”

I never should have accused Bex of being name-ist. All Kittys really were man-stealing whores. We stood close to one of the open windows, and I was grateful for the slight breeze. “When you told me about the ball, you could have mentioned that it was being thrown by the Antichrist and her parents.”

His lips twitched. “Lady Katherine is not that bad.”

Why could he use her first name but not mine? I wanted to ask but didn’t. “Yes, she is. It wouldn’t surprise me to find out she’d built a gingerbread house in her backyard. And she probably kicks kittens for fun after she bathes in the blood of virgins.”

He was quiet, and I realized he was trying not to laugh. He came across as hard and grouchy, but I suspected there was a nice man with a sense of humor under all of that velvet and linen.

I wanted that nice guy to make an appearance. “Personally, I’m planning on putting up garlic and crosses once we get back home.” Wait. When did Dracula become popular? Did they even know anything about vampires in England yet? “Because she’s a bloodsucking vampire,” I explained.

At that, an actual smile broke free. He should seriously smile all the time. He’d have the entire world at his feet if he did. *No thinking about gorgeous smiles*, I reminded myself. Also, no thinking about calling Hartley Hall home. It wasn’t my home and never would be, regardless of whatever Hartley had planned for me and his brother.

“I am quite certain she’s not undead. Just ambitious. Her uncle recently died, and her father gained the earldom and the estates. Lady Katherine is determined to retain both.” I heard the unspoken part. Hartley was her means to an end.

There were so many ways to take her out and make her leave Hartley alone. I could shove her under a couch cushion. Or hide her under a toadstool. Or cram her back into the thimble she had obviously climbed out of.

“I suppose we should at least dance,” Hartley said, the smile lingering on his face. I wonder if he knew that he was smiling. If his face muscles hurt from doing it.

But now I would have to turn myself into an even bigger freak. “To be honest, I don’t actually know how to do these kinds of dances.”

He cocked his head to one side. “You’re not familiar with any of the dances that are being done? What sorts of dancing do you do in America?”

There was no way on earth I could explain to him about twerking or the Electric Slide. The idea of going out there and showing him how I danced struck me as so funny that I couldn’t help myself. I laughed. And laughed. “Let’s just say that if I showed you how we danced, we’d probably get kicked out.”

And despite not letting him in on the joke, his grin widened. “Then perhaps you should if it guarantees us an early exit.”

Someone approached, and his smile died, falling off his face. Which broke my heart just a smidge. I followed his gaze and saw a man closing in on us. He was average looking, brown hair, brown eyes. Shorter than me. Wearing a noisy purple coat and green pants. Like a historical version of the Joker. Was he color-blind?

“Hartley.” He made a slight bow. Hartley didn’t respond. He was too busy shooting daggers with his eyes. Animosity and anger rolled off Hartley in palpable waves. I thought the guy should probably draw himself a chalk outline, because it looked like Hartley was planning on killing him. The man looked at me, and I wondered what he had done to make Hartley hate him so much. “You haven’t introduced me to your lovely friend.”

“That would be because I don’t want you to meet,” Hartley ground the words out. “Had I known you’d be here, we would not have come at all.”

Shots fired! If this guy had any sense at all, he’d run. Hartley was not someone you wanted to mess with when he was angry.

This dude was obviously a moron, though. He stood his ground. I might have respected him a little if I didn’t already dislike him out of loyalty to Hartley.

“I say, it is rather bad form bringing your doxy out in public. Everyone’s shocked.”

I had no idea what this guy had just accused him of, but whatever it was, it wasn’t good. I could almost see the steam and heat radiating off Hartley. His hands curled into fists. “How dare you! She is not . . .” He glanced at me and then dove back into his war of words. “She is a guest in my home.”

The man seemed way too pleased with himself. Like the cat who had figured out how to milk a cow all on its own and ate cream every single day. “Yes, staying in your home without a chaperone, or so the rumors go.”

“Rumors you started?”

I’d never personally witnessed a murder before, but I was starting to worry that I might have a front-row seat to one.

The obviously-soon-to-be-dead guy studied his fingernails nonchalantly. “One can’t help but share what one hears.” With one last predatory grin, the man finally left.

I had a billion questions. Who was that? Why was Hartley so mad? What was happening, and how could I diffuse this situation? But I didn’t dare ask any of them.

“We’re leaving. Now.”

Leaving? Had it really been that bad? He headed back the way we’d come in, and I didn’t have any choice but to grab my skirts and follow him. I noticed all the stares coming our way but tried to ignore them. A stone sank to the bottom of my stomach and began to grow. Whatever was wrong, I thought I might be the cause of it. His stride was much longer than mine, and I saw him barking at a footman, who ran out of the room like his feet were on fire.

Then we were outside, waiting for our carriage. We stood in silence, Hartley still fuming and me too scared to say anything. A carriage pulled up, but it wasn’t his. It looked kind of generic. Maybe it was like a taxi. Hartley wrenched the door open. “Get in.”

“You could ask nicely.” He didn’t have to be so rude.

“You could, for once, do as you’re told.”

Part of me wanted to tell him off, but I wasn’t about to wander around London at night. I didn’t like being bossed around, but I did not have a death wish. So I settled for glaring at him as I climbed in. He sat in the seat across from me, and once he’d closed the door, the carriage lurched forward.

He turned to look out the window, effectively ignoring me. The light came in through the window, highlighting his profile. Which was, to my dismay, also gorgeous. Didn’t he ever look bad?

Because even mad, he was still kind of magnificent. He wasn’t like the boys I’d known in college. He was a man. A masculine, manly man. From the tips of his ruffled hair down to the end of his shiny boots. It was thrilling in a way that I never would have expected. In a purely feminine way I hadn’t even known existed. Men like him did not hang out and hook

up. Men like him had loyalty. Honor. Responsibility. They made and kept lifetime commitments. It was heady.

Or maybe that was the anger talking.

I saw a scar close to his hairline that I'd never noticed before. Briefly forgetting that I was aggravated by his behavior, I wondered how he'd gotten it. Knife fight? Tiger wrestling? Ninja attack? What did they do in this century that would cause something like that?

"Stop staring."

Another command. "Vain much?" I countered, even though I totally had been staring at him. I just didn't want him to acknowledge that I'd done it. He turned to face me, and it was like he'd turned a laser beam on me with his gaze. I almost jumped.

"I thought you had a chaperone." His voice sounded accusing. "You said you had a chaperone."

Obviously I was seriously demented, because I still thought he was hot even when he was accusing me of being a liar. Technically, he was right and I had lied, but in my defense that was back when I'd thought this was all a dream. There was no way to explain that to him. So I relied on my old friend, sarcasm. "Oh yes, you mean the invisible woman who's been having tea with me every day?"

He gave me a dirty look, and I shot him one back. I knew how Mrs. Farnsworth worked. I was sure she had filled the earl in on my movements for every moment of every day that he was gone. Was he really so busy it hadn't even registered? And what did it matter whether or not I had a chaperone?

"In case you don't remember, I hit my head." Yes, I was floundering for any excuse that I could use, determined to be right. "You're not supposed to believe everything someone with head trauma says. I barely knew what was going on." True, but it didn't really explain why I hadn't come clean later. Which meant I needed to change tactics so that he wouldn't point it out. "Who was that man, anyway? And what made you so mad?"

His jaw clenched and unclenched before he spoke. "That was George Godwin. He killed my fiancée."

What the what? He killed Hartley's fiancée? I felt thoroughly chastened. The anger flooded out of my body, leaving me feeling sad for him. "Why isn't he in prison?"

His Adam's apple bobbed. "It was . . . indirectly. It's not something I wish to speak about."

Obviously, there was a major story. One that my curiosity demanded I get to the bottom of. Mr. I-Hate-Marriage had been engaged? And she'd been killed? "I get why you were so upset."

"That wasn't what made me angry."

Really? That seemed reason enough. "Then why?"

Hartley looked uncomfortable. Almost embarrassed. "He thought you were my doxy."

I remembered that word but had no idea what it meant. "Your what?"

He averted his eyes. "My mistress. Godwin implied that you were my mistress."

Did that mean the same thing here that it meant in my time? "Why would he think that?"

Hartley leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees. I couldn't help it. I scooted back. He was too imposing. Took up too much space. Not to mention that my heart had started to beat erratically just by him being this close. "Because we're alone in my home with your nonexistent chaperone."

"How can anyone think we're alone?" I protested. "There are like six thousand people living in your house."

"Servants are not chaperones."

"So because we're both single and don't have somebody with the title of chaperone, we must be doing it? That's ridiculous." I couldn't say what I wanted to say. Stupid nineteenth century. So instead I settled for, "Stupid England. Suddenly I want to dump a bunch of tea in a harbor."

"There is no need to throw your own personal Boston Tea Party."

Oh sure, that reference he got.

He sat back, and I felt like I could breathe again. "This is partly my fault. I should have considered what you being an American would mean. Your total lack of social graces. You didn't curtsy to any of the Darlingtons. You tried to shake hands with Lord Cowell. And now this."

Dander seriously up. "I'll have you know that being American is fantastic. Why would you blame anything on me being American? We have so many great things. Baseball. Apple pie. The Grand Canyon. Disneyland." And from his expression I saw that we had veered back into familiar territory where he had no idea what I was talking about.

The carriage had come to a stop, with me still yelling about how awesome America was. It got harder and harder to breathe. The angrier I got, the more my corset seemed to cut off my circulation. He reached out his hand to help me, but everything went hazy, and the sidewalk rushed up toward my face.

I woke up in the parlor, on the couch. I had fainted. Again. I probed my face with my fingers, certain I must have hurt myself. But nothing felt broken. Hartley must have caught me before I fell. And then carried me inside.

Fainting wasn't something I had done a lot of. If I did, it was always due to my vasovagal response. I couldn't stand the sight of blood and would immediately pass out. This time I suspected it was due to my inability to breathe properly because of this infernal contraption that even now was limiting my airflow.

"Welcome back." Hartley stood in the doorway with his arms folded. "While you were once again unconscious, I came up with a plan."

I sat up, my head still dizzy, my lungs still tight. "Plan?"

"There is only one thing to be done, only one person who can fix our current situation. I shall call on Charles first thing tomorrow."

Before I could ask about his plan and who Charles was, Hartley made a slight bow and walked away muttering, "Like a fairy tale."

And for probably the first time ever, I had to agree with him. He had been right about the ball. I didn't know what I was doing. I didn't know their rules or manners or anything. I'd be exposed as a fraud, be tossed out and then never get home.

That ball had been nothing like a fairy tale. More like a nightmare.

One I was even more desperate than ever to escape from.

CHAPTER EIGHT

THINGS I'M GOING TO INVENT IF I GET STUCK IN 1816

Toothpaste, toothbrushes, and floss

When I woke up the next morning, I yelped when I saw a pair of bright yellow eyes staring at me. Only a few inches away from my face, a black cat perched on one of my pillows, studying me. "Um, hi."

Rosemary breezed into my room, carrying a tray. "That's Sir Reginald. He was Lady Penmere's cat before she wed Lord Penmere."

"Who? What?" was all I could manage. I rubbed my eyes, but it didn't help. Still exhausted and aching. My head hurt, my chest still hurt, and I would have done just about anything for some real, modernized pain medicine.

"Lady Penmere is Lord Hartley's elder sister. He also has a younger brother and twin sisters, Lady Julia and Lady Jessica."

James, Julia, and Jessica. I was detecting a theme here. "What is Lady Penmere's first name?"

My lady's maid gave me a strange expression. "Jane."

Aha! There was a *J* naming theme. What did that make Hartley? John? Jacob? Jingleheimer Schmidt?

I was about to ask, but Rosemary spoke first. "She took the cat with her when she moved to her new home, but Sir Reginald returned here. No matter how many times she tried, he kept coming back. She finally gave up."

And now he was stalking me, like a feline vulture. I sat up and scooted away from him, but he stayed still. Watching me. Like he was trying to figure out how I would taste.

Not to mention the fact that I knew I had closed my bedroom door last night. How had he gotten in?

Before I could worry too much about mystical cats walking through doors, I noticed Rosemary standing in front of me, expectantly. I'd missed what she'd said. "Sorry, what did you just say?"

“You have to hurry and dress. Mrs. Meriweather has arrived, and Lord Hartley sent me to fetch you.”

Like I was a stick for her to retrieve. I rolled my eyes, keeping my distance from Sir Reginald as I climbed out of bed. I went through the process of cleaning myself the best that I could. I really wanted to give my teeth a good brushing and flossing, because what they used did not bear discussing as it was so ineffective. I’d even sent Rosemary to get me some mint leaves, just to fool myself into thinking my hygiene was better than it was.

I didn’t bother asking who Mrs. Meriweather was or that I had been expecting to meet someone named Charles. I’d discovered that even when Rosemary knew what was going on, she didn’t always tell me. Like her loyalty was to Hartley first and me second. Which made sense because he was in charge of her paycheck, living situation, and the food that she ate, but still.

In record time, she had me dressed, hair done, and on my way to the drawing room. Hartley had his back to me, blocking my view. I cleared my throat, and he stepped to one side, and I saw an older woman. She had pale-blonde hair that had begun to turn gray and fair skin, and she sat like her spine was made out of metal. She was also dressed all in black. Like she had recently joined the Night’s Watch. Or an emo band.

Was I supposed to curtsy? Kiss her hand? I didn’t know the protocol, so I stood there, like a moron.

“Aunt Charles, may I introduce Miss Emma Blythe?” Hartley said. “Miss Blythe, this is my aunt, Lady Charles Meriweather.”

“Mrs. Meriweather,” she corrected, looking down her nose at me. “You know I prefer my husband’s address to my former one.” She studied me like I was a racehorse and she was figuring out how much to bet on me.

“Your name is Charles?” I couldn’t help but ask.

“Indeed.”

Just that. Indeed. No explanation. She was a little intimidating. Must be a family trait.

“Come and sit by me, please. I wish to become better acquainted with you.” She patted the cushion next to her, and she seemed like the kind of woman you didn’t say no to. So I sat. And tried to smile. And not compare the predatory gleam in her eye to Sir Reginald’s.

“Excellent idea, as I think it best she move into your home this morning. I shall have Stephens tell her maid—”

“You shall do no such thing,” she interrupted him, and I was impressed. Hartley didn’t seem like the kind of guy who got interrupted and took it. “If you are so intent on your harebrained scheme to marry her off to James, it would be easier to accomplish if she were always underfoot. The solution is that I will move in here for the time being. Now leave, so that I may get to know Miss Blythe in order to better assess our current situation.”

He gave a slight bow and left the room. For some reason, that made me feel worse. I wanted him to stay. As a buffer, if nothing else.

She was quiet for a moment before she said, “Hartley is my only nephew I do not despise. Well, perhaps not the only one, but I assure you it is a very short list.”

“Wow. Your other nephews must be spectacularly awful people.”

That made her throw her head back and laugh, which made me relax. Just a little. She wasn’t as scary as she had initially seemed. “And tell me, Miss Blythe, what do you think of Hartley’s plan to marry you to his brother?”

Wasn’t I supposed to be polite and say nice things? I couldn’t lie to her, though. Especially not once I noticed that she had the same dark-blue eyes as Hartley. “I think it’s completely stupid and it would have been nice if he’d bothered to ask me if I was even interested in doing it. I like your nephew, and he’s handsome and can be charming, but he’s kind of an idiot sometimes.”

“Quite right,” she nodded. “I think we’re going to get along very well, Miss Blythe.”

“You can call me Emma.” I knew it had freaked Hartley out when I’d suggested it, but I was so tired of being called by a name that wasn’t even mine.

“So I shall. And you may call me Charles. Or Aunt Meriweather, as we’re about to become family, should Hartley have his way.” Aunt Meriweather was a mouthful. Her eyes sparkled dangerously, like she knew something about me that I didn’t even know. “You inquired about my name? I was the last daughter in a family of seven girls, and my father insisted I have his name as he became resigned to the fact that there would be no male heir. He raised me as he would a son, despite my mother’s

objections. And he left the bulk of his inheritance that was not tied into his estate to me. My sisters all married very well with exceedingly healthy dowries, but they pale in comparison to what I was given."

Um, okay. What did that have to do with anything?

Charles must have seen my unspoken question, because she went on. "Speaking of money is vulgar and outside of this one occasion we will not speak of it again. But you must understand why Hartley called on me and why I will be able to help you. The Admiral and I were unable to have children." Her voice broke slightly before she went on. "And he amassed a good deal of money on his own before he died, leaving me a wealthy heiress twice over. I am richer than Midas, related to half the *ton*, and have enough money to buy my way out of trouble."

Huh. Just like the Kennedys.

"Now everyone in decent society lives in mortal fear of offending me, as I can leave my money to whomever I wish. It has put me in a unique position, and whomever I choose to sponsor or protect, the rest of them must accept. I am forgiven of whatever I wish to be forgiven of and so is anyone under my wing." She blinked a few times, as if coming to a decision. "And I will help you, my dear. I can tell that you are a good and honest person."

I usually was honest. Other than the whole lying to everybody about who I was and where I was from. "But why would you help me?"

Charles pushed back her shoulders. "There are three things in this life that have brought me tremendous joy. Family is the first. Breeding horses is second. And since I was able to outmaneuver all fortune hunters and was privileged enough to be married for nearly thirty years to a man that I loved, it brings me great pleasure to help others experience the same."

Great. A matchmaker. That was all I needed. I really would have to marry James.

She reached out a hand as if she meant to touch my hair, but stopped herself. "You have lovely hair, and the style is adequate. I shall send Danvers over to your lady's maid to give her further instruction and recommendations. For now, we must see to your wardrobe." She stood up, and I quickly did the same.

Feeling awkward, I led her upstairs to my room. She had a walking stick, but she didn't seem to actually use it. Other than to poke me with it.

“According to my nephew, there are many things that I will have to teach you. Among them, we shall have to teach you how to walk properly.”

“And here I was, thinking I’d mastered that years ago.”

That made her smile. “No talking back. You truly have terrible posture. Shoulders back, head lifted, if you please.”

I didn’t please, but I knew it was necessary. It was also uncomfortable, but the corset helped. I’d never been so glad to see my bedroom before. I went over to the dressing room and showed her my dresses. She ran her hand across a couple of them. “This is worse than I thought. There certainly is not enough here to make you fashionable. Go and ring for your maid. Have her send a footman to retrieve the mantua maker who did these. I have need of her immediately.”

Contrary to what Hartley thought, I could do as I was told. Within minutes, it was all set up. “Do I really not have enough clothes?”

She gave me a sympathetic look. “Dear girl, were you so very poor in America?”

Poverty had nothing to do with it. A general lack of knowledge about my surroundings did. There was one thing I knew, though. “I don’t have any money to buy more clothes.” I felt guilty because I had no intention of being a part of their long-term plan for me, and while I was grateful for Hartley’s generosity, I didn’t want him to have to spend more money on me.

“Nonsense. It shall be my gift to you, and I insist that you accept. A woman must use every type of weaponry she has in her arsenal, and it all begins with appearance.” She gave me a satisfied grin that I didn’t know how to interpret. “I shall teach you everything you must know to capture Hartley. He won’t be able to resist.”

Hartley? “You mean James,” I corrected her.

“Did I not say James?”

No, she did not. And the false innocence in her voice made me suspicious. What was she planning? There was no way I was capable of making one man fall in love with me, let alone two.

“Let us retire downstairs, and while we wait for your dressmaker to arrive, we will go over basic table manners. We will be able to practice them tonight at supper when we dine with Hartley.”

Taking a deep breath, I nodded. We might as well get started. Not that anything she taught me would ever be applicable in my real life.

Sort of like algebra and geometry.

Halfway down the stairs, she paused, making me stop short. “This may sound odd, but I feel as if we’ve met before.”

Weird thing was, I kind of knew what she was talking about and felt the same. Like we’d been close friends in a previous life and had just found each other again. “Me too.”

She gave me a sweet smile that seemed at odds with her severe way of dressing and continued downstairs. A rushing sensation smacked into me, and I had the strongest sense of déjà vu that I’d ever experienced. As if everything here was familiar and I knew this house and this family. As if I had always known and loved them.

Chills raced up and down my back. I shivered once, trying to brush them off, and ran to catch up with Charles.

* * *

“Do I have to change clothes every time we have dinner? The dress I had on before was really nice.” He couldn’t help it, his ears pricked up at the sound of her voice in the hallway.

His aunt answered her. “Yes, my dear. There are day dresses and evening dresses and different times that you will be expected to change. We will go over that tomorrow. For now, let’s see how well your lesson stuck.”

Hartley got to his feet when his aunt and Miss Blythe came into the room. He bowed slightly, and both women nodded back. “Very good,” he said to Miss Blythe. But instead of accepting the compliment for finally entering a room correctly, she gave him a withering look and walked away.

Which again perplexed him. Most women lapped up compliments like a thirsty dog at its bowl. Miss Blythe seemed vexed. Which, for some unimaginable reason, amused him.

“We have been very busy this afternoon,” Aunt Charles said. He was one of the few family members allowed to address her as such. “She is a quick study.”

“I don’t doubt it.” The words left his mouth without his consent. Miss Blythe looked at him strangely, as if confused. He didn’t know why. There had never been any doubt about her intelligence, but he was glad that his aunt saw it as well. He knew James would prefer it.

As did he.

“And what have you been up to these past few hours while we’ve been working so intently?” his aunt inquired.

Before he could answer, Stephens announced that supper was served. Hartley offered his arms to both women, while Aunt Charles mentioned something to Miss Blythe about rules of precedence not applying in such an informal setting. “I visited a friend and then did some boxing down at Jackson’s,” he answered as they all followed the butler into the dining room.

What he did not mention was that he had done it to clear his head. That punching other men provided him with relief from what he had witnessed earlier, with his aunt and Miss Blythe quickly becoming bosom friends. It was what he wanted, and he was glad that Aunt Charles had agreed to help them both, but Miss Blythe was making herself at home in his life, with his loved ones, and it . . . disturbed him.

More than he would have cared to admit.

“Hanging out and exercising? Men get to have all the fun in this time period,” Miss Blythe said, and he noticed that she looked particularly fetching in that shade of blue, while he puzzled over her strange choice of words. Hanging out? Time period?

“Indeed,” his aunt agreed as they were both seated at the table.

“Yes, when they’re not busy managing everything else,” he said.

“I offered to help you out,” Miss Blythe reminded him.

“He should hire a secretary, but he won’t,” his aunt added.

“He seems really stubborn.”

“As a mule. And while I love some of my nephews, I will say this for them—they are all a single-minded, pigheaded lot. They get that from their grandfather. Once they have decided on a course of action, nothing will deter them. Not even my money.”

He did not like their conspiratorial tones or the knowing smiles that passed between the two women. He was the earl. He should be afforded some degree of respect, particularly in his own home. But even he knew better than to throw the gauntlet down at Aunt Charles. He did the only thing he could think of. He changed the subject. “You said that Miss Blythe was a quick study? Things are going well?”

His aunt nodded, but Miss Blythe said, “Oh, I can’t take all the credit. Charles is a really good teacher.”

Hartley couldn’t stop his reaction and knew that both of his eyebrows raised up in surprise at her use of his aunt’s Christian name.

“Don’t look so shocked, Hartley. The girl is soon to be part of our family, is she not? I invited her to use my given name as I shall use hers. In company, it will tell them that we enjoy a degree of intimacy that will make them even more eager to accept her.”

The footmen arrived to serve the first course, and Miss Blythe reached for the tray. “Thanks, Jamie. I can take that from you.”

“You must allow William to serve you,” Hartley said. He should probably assist with the lessons where he could.

“Pretty sure his name is Jamie. And why? I can do it myself. I’m sure he’s got better things to do. Like holding up the walls.” She gestured around to the footmen who were not serving. They stood in their livery against said walls, waiting to be of service.

A bit of despair creeped in, and Hartley hoped this all wasn’t pointless, that she wasn’t so different that she would never be accepted in polite society and never be a suitable wife for his brother. But his fears were calmed as his aunt explained the whys and hows of interacting with servants, especially among company. Miss Blythe nodded, but she didn’t seem to like what she was hearing.

“By the time we’re done, Emma, no one will suspect that you weren’t to the manor born,” Aunt Charles said, before launching into the proper address and greetings for everyone from a duchess younger than herself to a baron’s son old enough to be her father. These things had been ingrained in him for so long, they were second nature. He imagined it would not be easy for Miss Blythe to learn everything it had taken him a lifetime to acquire.

The next course arrived, and despite her previous instruction, he heard Miss Blythe say, “Thank you for bringing all this out, Tommy. Please tell Mrs. Johnson it’s been amazing.” She looked at them after she had done so. “We’re not in company. This is just family, right? So it’s okay? I really do appreciate everything they’re doing.”

His aunt assured her it was fine, if rather unconventional.

It was the perfect word to describe Miss Blythe. Unconventional. He wondered if his brother would love that about her or if he would dislike it.

Aunt Charles continued to instruct while Miss Blythe looked over her utensils. She seemed at a loss as to which fork to use. He was on the verge

of telling her when there was a soft cough from the footman who had just served her and was now directly across from her, behind his aunt. In his peripheral vision, Hartley saw the footman gesture to the left. Miss Blythe carefully moved her hand in that direction until it hovered over the correct fork. The footman she'd called Tommy coughed again, and Miss Blythe picked up the fork in triumph.

"Hartley?" He realized that his aunt had said his name more than once in an attempt to get his attention—the attention that had been completely focused on Miss Blythe and her entertaining victory over the flatware. "Other than what we've already discussed, what other assumptions are being made about you and Emma?"

He swallowed, his Adam's apple bobbing. The implications that Godwin had made . . . he should have called the man out then and there. He was grateful Aunt Charles was not forcing him to repeat the accusations in front of Miss Blythe. It had been hard enough to tell her the first time. "Today someone asked whether I was her guardian."

"The girl is one and twenty. She has no need of a guardian."

"If you were my guardian," Miss Blythe asked, "what would that make me?"

"My ward, which you are not," he replied.

"Your ward? Like Batman and Robin. Off to fight our archnemesis, the Evil Fortune Hunter," she grinned.

What was a bat man, and why would he have a robin? Before he could ask her to explain further, Miss Blythe spoke again. "I've been wanting to ask you something since I got here. If that's okay." She looked to Aunt Charles for direction and then back at him. Her green eyes looked particularly bright and beautiful.

He nodded, only a bit concerned at what she might say.

"What is that thing you're wearing around your neck?"

Hartley looked down, confused by her question. "My cravat?"

"Yeah. What's the point?"

The point? "Beg your pardon?"

Aunt Charles said something to her, and Miss Blythe removed her elbows from the table. "Why do you wear it?"

"Because . . ." His voice trailed off. Saying it was fashionable or stylish made him feel like a nick-ninny. So he settled on, "Because it's what gentlemen wear."

“Okay.” Her voice indicated she didn’t believe him. “I guess if nothing else, at least you’ll always have a big bandage around if somebody gets hurt. But it kind of makes you look like you lost a bet.”

At that, his aunt covered her mouth, trying very hard not to laugh. And despite the insult to his dress and his valet, even Hartley had a hard time not smiling.

“Oh, come on,” Miss Blythe cajoled. “You almost smiled. What do you have against smiling? Does it hurt your face?”

“Life is a series of great disappointments ended by the greatest one of all,” he informed her, wondering why she gave any notice to whether or not he smiled.

And why it disappointed him that he had disappointed her.

“What do you like to do, Emma?” His aunt came to his rescue, and he could hear the unshed laughter in her voice. “Do you ride?”

“Ride what?”

“Horses, my dear.”

“Right. Horses. I’ve always wanted to. I even went through a phase when I was thirteen where I was obsessed with horses. But I’ve never actually ridden one.” He could hear her wistful tone.

He could help with that. “Then I shall have to mount you while you’re here.”

Miss Blythe had been taking a drink, but at his response she began to cough, and liquid sprayed all over her plate. “What?” she asked, sounding panicked. “What do you mean?”

Several footmen darted forward to help clean up the mess, as if they couldn’t wait to be of service to her. “Provide you with a horse. A mount.” Why had she reacted that way? What had she thought he meant?

Her face turned a bright pink, and it took several moments before she’d regained control of herself and a mischievous grin broke out across her face, lighting up her features. “I thought you meant something else. Where I’m from, that means something totally different.”

It did not take much for him to intuit her faulty interpretation, and he was glad that his aunt had continued her instruction, oblivious to him. Because the images that assaulted him and his reaction to them were not proper in a formal or informal setting. How could an innocent maiden arrive at that conclusion to his words?

As his aunt had said, Miss Blythe was unconventional. A mystery. A puzzle.

But he would not be the one to solve her.

CHAPTER NINE

THINGS I'M GOING TO INVENT IF I GET STUCK IN 1816

Deodorant

Despite the age difference, Charles quickly became my best friend. I missed Bex desperately, but I was glad I had someone to help fill the void.

Not that she made my life easy. Our days were filled with instruction and lessons and tests. It was like cramming for finals, trying to learn all these things at once. The British had rules for everything. It was ridiculous.

And when we weren't studying or practicing, Charles took me shopping. She'd ordered so many dresses I didn't know if I would have time to wear them all before I went back home. When I'd said as much to Rosemary, she told me that I would have to do this every season! I asked what I was supposed to do with all the leftover dresses, and she informed me that many noblewomen gave their old dresses to their maids, who sold them to make some extra money. I didn't have a problem with that.

We went everywhere so that we were seen together. My favorite shop was one called Floris that made things like perfumes. Charles had the owner design my own personal fragrance, and it was this blend of orange blossom and vanilla. I literally smelled like a Creamsicle. In addition to perfume, he gave me bath oils, and Charles bought soap and checked out some hair combs. I thought this would be a perfect store to buy a razor, but the owner looked at me strangely when I asked for a feminine version of the straightedge that men used. Given what I now knew about politeness and manners, I couldn't explain the forest situation happening on my legs to him. And considering how often I cut myself with a safety razor, I knew a straight edge would probably kill me.

I was beyond grateful for the perfume. I had taken to putting baking soda on my hairy armpits in an attempt to contain my natural smell, because there was no such thing as deodorant. The perfume would help. I could hardly hope to lure a man while reeking of BO.

Besides shopping, Charles took me to visit some family members. We “called” on them. And those visits were excruciating. Everyone was uncomfortable with me, but as Charles had predicted, no one dared offend her, or me. So we made awkward small talk with strangers in the morning and went back to Hartley Hall to practice further and to correct any mistakes I’d made that day.

One morning we were “in” for visits, and people were supposed to stop by and say hi. And given my luck, I shouldn’t have been surprised when one of our very first visits was Lady Kitty Darlington and her mother.

Lady Kitty was as short and awful as I’d remembered. I hadn’t imagined it. Stephens announced them, and they followed in after him. I curtsied slightly, resenting that I had to do it. While the mom was dressed appropriately, Lady Kitty had on a pale rose dress that was showing off her arms and some cleavage. Which I now knew was totally inappropriate for daytime. Aunt Charles would have lectured me about how it said something about a woman’s character to show up dressed like that. Unfortunately, now I couldn’t cling to my feminist high ground, as Lady Kitty proved Charles’s theory to be true.

The Darlingtons greeted Charles with a fake enthusiasm that set my teeth on edge. They barely acknowledged me, which I was totally fine with. I found that I still wanted to inflict mortal harm on Kitty. It wouldn’t be that hard to dispose of the body. I bet she’d fit up the chimney.

Tea was delivered, and Charles had assigned me the task of pouring and serving to make sure I did it correctly.

And I refrained from pouring any tea on Kitty, which I thought I deserved an award for. She accepted her tea with a malicious gleam in her eyes. “A little bird told me that we are destined to become the dearest of friends.”

I couldn’t imagine what kind of bird would think that I would ever want to be friends with this, as Charles would call her, title digger. “I’m afraid I don’t catch your meaning,” I said, parroting the words Charles had taught me for when somebody said something I didn’t like.

“Oh!” She had the nerve to look surprised. Like she didn’t know exactly what she doing. Like every word and every movement weren’t calculated. “I thought it to be common knowledge that you are to marry Mr. Portwood?”

Who? Oh, right. That was Hartley's family name. Portwood. She meant James.

And how would she even know about that? As far as I knew, Hartley, Charles, and I were the only people who knew about the plan. It didn't seem like something Hartley would advertise, since he was hoping to trick James into marrying me. Giving him a heads-up would defeat the purpose.

Looked like Hartley had a traitor in his household. I'd lay money on Mrs. Farnsworth.

"What an interesting thing to say," Charles butted in. And while her words sounded polite, her implication was clear. She was telling Lady Kitty to stop.

Lady Kitty did not get the hint.

"If it were true, perhaps someday we might even be sisters."

Red, raging anger clouded my vision. I actually saw colors as my hands shook. How stupid was this chick? She was insulting me via rumor while simultaneously insinuating that she was going to marry Hartley, in front of his favorite aunt. I knew this "wasn't done." It made her look pathetic and desperate, and I was back to calculating how best to dispose of her teeny body.

"I don't know how that would happen since neither one of us has any siblings," I said, keeping my polite face and voice intact. I could tell Charles approved of my reply. There was really nothing Kitty could say back. If she outright said she intended to marry Hartley, the fallout of that would be epic.

Half of me hoped she would.

Instead, she proceeded to ignore me but kept up a running monologue that had numerous comments about the sorry state "the colonies" were in.

Finally, and surprisingly, even Kitty's mom seemed as uncomfortable as we were, and she made their excuses and dragged her daughter out.

"I really hate her," I told Charles after they left.

"Lady Katherine?" she unnecessarily asked.

"Lady Katherine, Lucifer, whatever name she's currently using." That little twit had probably been cackling into her magic mirror all morning.

"Interesting."

I didn't know what that "interesting" meant. What did she find interesting? That I wanted to drive a stake through Kitty's heart? I knew better than to ask. If Charles wanted to elaborate, she would.

After a ton more fake and superficial visits from fake and superficial people, we were finally done. We moved into Hartley's study. Sometimes, while he was out doing whatever, we would practice and go over stuff in the library. It killed me to have to sit still, posture correct, not able to search for the magic book that had a spell in it to return me home.

And yes, even thinking the words "magic book" and "spell" made me feel like somebody should find a nice, white, stretchy straitjacket and wrap me up in it.

Crazy or not, today, I finally had my chance. Hartley was gone, doing whatever it was that guys like him did, and a note arrived for Charles. Apparently, her corgi dogs were missing her, especially one named Princess. She left immediately to visit her fur babies, and I was alone. Alone in the library. I could hardly contain my giddy excitement.

At first I just darted all over the place, hoping something would jump out at me. I looked at the oldest books I could find but saw nothing that resembled a spell book. It didn't help that apparently no one here had ever heard of the Dewey decimal system, and I couldn't figure out how things were organized. I decided to be more methodical about it and start on the south side of the room and work my way over, going book by book. It would take forever, but what other choice did I have?

Problem was, I ran across a copy of Grimms' fairy tales. I opened it. First edition, published in 1812. I so loved fairy tales. Especially ones where the evil witch got hers. I knew I probably shouldn't stop looking for the spell book, as I didn't know when an opportunity like this would come along again, but . . .

There was a soft chaise lounge next to the fireplace. The idea of relaxing and getting lost in these stories was so appealing that I couldn't help it. I kicked off my shoes and got comfortable on the chaise, propping my legs up. Letting out as deep of a sigh as I could given that I was still wearing that infernal corset, I smiled.

As I began the tale of "The Frog King," I realized that for the first time in a long time, I felt really and truly at peace. Happy, even.

Right until the moment Hartley walked in and caught me.

* * *

Of all the things that Hartley had imagined might happen that day, not once did he consider the possibility that he would come into his study and find Miss Blythe with her shapely legs exposed, lost in a book. His steps faltered.

He should have demanded to know what she thought she was doing. What if someone else had found her in this state? He should have ordered her to leave the room. But the words that came out of his mouth were, "You read?"

Miss Blythe started, her hand going to her heart, drawing his eye there. She quickly sat up, spreading her skirts over her legs. Which was both a relief and a pity. At first he thought she might apologize, but he saw the moment when she decided to fight back against his implication. "Why do you sound so surprised? Do you not know any women who read?"

"I suppose some do, of the bluestocking variety. But I've found women like that to be insufferable." Let her do with that what she would.

"Do you think I'm insufferable?" Her inflection had changed, and she no longer sounded angry. She sounded sad. Wounded.

It did something to him that he couldn't have explained. There was a desire to protect her, to admonish and punish himself for causing her any kind of pain.

But he couldn't let her know that. "Not at the moment. Fortunately, you are the sort of woman who improves upon acquaintance."

That made her smile, and he suddenly understood her desire to make him smile. He liked being the reason for her happiness.

"What are you reading?" he found himself asking as he walked to his desk. He had intended to come in here and get some work done. He'd been spending far more time away from home than he usually did. He didn't want to admit it to himself, but Miss Blythe was a distraction.

She held up her book. "Grimms' fairy tales. Or *Children's and Household Tales*. But these stories are all completely wrong. They're supposed to all begin with 'once upon a time' and end with 'and they all lived happily ever after.' Not one of them has that. I'm guessing it was probably a translation problem."

Miss Blythe shifted in her seat, and he forced himself to look down at his books. "I'm sorry they're not to your liking."

"Not only that, but they're pretty gruesome. People get their eyes plucked out by birds or tear off their own sea-foam legs. I prefer the

Disney versions."

A scent wafted over to him, one he'd never detected before. It smelled vaguely of citrus and vanilla. It was Miss Blythe. He closed his eyes and realized that, for the rest of his life, if he ever smelled that particular combination again, he would always think of her.

"Can I, I mean, may I ask you for a favor?"

He opened his eyes slowly, perturbed by the fact that in that moment, he would have given her anything.

"When Charles isn't around, and it's just us, can I not sit like someone stuck a rod up my . . . like the way I'm supposed to? I get tired and sore. Where I'm from people don't sit like that. Okay, maybe some people do, but I don't."

"And how do you normally sit?"

"I lounge. And you have all these fantastic lounging chairs that I can't even use, but more than anything I just want to relax. I promise to keep it a secret."

At that word, "secret," something shifted in her body. Miss Blythe had a secret. He knew it to be true from the way her gaze darted down, how she looked around as if she feared discovery, the way her arms wrapped around her torso. And it wasn't the lounging. It was something else.

He hated that she kept something from him. Logically, he knew she was entitled to her privacy and whatever secrets she wished to keep. He shouldn't be upset. He had no cause to be. He didn't know what was more maddening—that she had a secret or that he cared.

Ordering himself away from that line of thinking, he noticed that in addition to her nervousness, she had sounded so weary. Upset or not, Hartley didn't have the ability to deny her request. "You have my permission to . . . lounge when we are alone. But only when it is just the two of us. You mustn't let my Aunt Charles see you. You will give her heart palpitations." Which he was certain of, because she was giving him a different sort of heart palpitations.

His reward was her happy smile. He ruminated on his use of the words "we" and "us" and how he liked it far more than he should have. He had the impression that Miss Blythe was unaware of how attractive she was, how distracting she could be. To the extent that he was unable to complete another mathematical equation the rest of the afternoon.

And instead of returning to her book and her lounging, she got up and began to peruse his collection of books. This went on for several minutes, and he was aware of every time her long, tapered fingers brushed against a book's spine, every time her skirts swished softly against the shelves, and every time some loose tendrils of hair brushed against her shoulder as she paused to consider. He heard a deep intake of breath.

"Were you smelling that book?"

She looked embarrassed. "No." Even though they both knew she had.

"Could you please select one and sit?" he asked in a tight voice. "You are quite . . . distracting."

"Is that an original Shakespeare?" She pointed at a manuscript near her waist.

"I would certainly hope so considering what I paid for it."

"You bought this?"

That caused him to stop pretending to work. "You say that with such a discouraging amount of surprise."

Miss Blythe finally dared to touch the manuscript, running one finger along the length of it, lovingly. "You just don't seem the type. I thought you didn't like to read."

He even put his quill down. "What gave you the impression that I do not like reading?"

"Um, that I've never actually seen you do it?"

"I am a very busy man."

"So I noticed. I'm surprised the whole world doesn't wait every morning for you to wake up and bless it with your presence."

It was easier to be angry. He didn't want to acknowledge what she stirred up in him, so he got mad instead. "Is that what you think? That I imagine myself lord of the entire world and believe it exists only to do my bidding?"

Miss Blythe turned to him, her green eyes alit with fire. "I was being facetious."

"I wasn't aware that you knew any words with that many syllables."

Her gaze narrowed, her chest rising rapidly, and even he was aware that he had gone too far. He relaxed his shoulders and began to apologize. He got as far as her name when she grabbed a pillow from the couch and threw it at him.

It just barely missed his head.

“Did you . . . did you just throw a pillow at me?” he asked in shock.

“I don’t know. Was it like this?” Then she had the audacity to throw another pillow at him. This one he fended off with his hands. She threw more pillows and emphasized each word she was saying with a throw. “Stop. Being. A. Jerk!”

“What is a jerk?”

“You are! So stop being one! Because it is so . . .” Her eyes rolled back in her head, and he was glad she was situated next to the sofa, as she collapsed toward it and not the small table. Shaking his head, he lifted her onto the sofa to make her more comfortable, trying very hard not to think about how her soft, pliant, feminine form felt in his arms, and waited.

Only a few minutes passed before she came back to herself, trying to suck in a deep breath.

“It is very difficult to have a rational discussion with you when you keep swooning,” he pointed out.

“I didn’t swoon. I inadvertently passed out. You would too if somebody strapped your lungs into a corset.”

“Every woman of my acquaintance manages to wear one without your proclivity for fainting.” He didn’t know why he kept provoking her. Why he liked her angry gaze, the flush on her cheeks and her chest. He should behave like a gentleman but found it difficult to remember when he was with Miss Blythe.

“Until you start wearing one, you don’t get to have an opinion about how somebody should react to it.” She reached for her slippers and slammed them onto her feet. “I’m pretty sure I’m misshaping my kidney and my pancreas just to wear what stupid men think is hot.”

While wondering what the weather had to do with anything, he found himself disappointed when she stormed out. He should have chased after her and apologized but reminded himself that she was to be James’s bride. He shouldn’t push her to anger and tease her. Hartley simply had to stop his behavior.

As he resolved to be kinder and more of a gentleman toward her, Aunt Charles entered the room with one of her dogs. “Princess will be staying here with us. She is not able to live without me.”

He refrained from any commentary about the corgi being just an animal, as he felt that he had used up his rudeness quotient for one day.

“Why are there pillows on the floor?”

The only response was the honest one. “Miss Blythe threw them at me.”

That seemed to please his aunt. “How delightful. Why, may I ask?”

“Apparently, I was being a ‘jerk.’”

“Were you?”

Her question confused him. “Was I what?”

“Being a jerk?”

“You don’t even know what that means,” he said.

The dog wiggled in Aunt Charles’s arms, wanting to be put down. Hartley wondered how many rugs he would have to replace when this was all over. “No, I don’t know what it means, but I’m sure you were being one and Emma was well within her rights to assault you with the décor.”

The corgi trotted out of the room on its stubby legs. His aunt followed her dog but stopped at the threshold of the room. “You know that you fight with her because you are attracted to her.”

His heart slammed hard against his chest, and his stomach clenched. “What a ridiculous . . .”

Aunt Charles held up a single hand to his protest. “Please don’t insult me by denying it. We both know it to be true.” Then she left with her corgi, and Hartley walked over to the shelves where Miss Blythe had stood, willing himself to calm down. He wouldn’t even entertain Aunt Charles’s ludicrous suggestion. That he fought with Miss Blythe because—he cut off his thought and chose a book. After a moment he held it up to his nose and smelled it before shoving it back into place with a curse.

Perhaps his aunt had been right about one thing. Perhaps he should take on a secretary.

Because he worried that as long as Miss Blythe was in this house, he might never be able to add up sums again.

CHAPTER TEN

THINGS I'M GOING TO INVENT IF I GET STUCK IN 1816

Sewing machines

I paced in my room for hours after that fight, refusing to change and go down for dinner. Part of me didn't want to give him the satisfaction of knowing that I was hiding out in my room, but the pissed-off part of me didn't care. I was too angry to sit next to him and eat.

Because I had the distinct impression that after he said something stupid and sexist, I would have to stab him in the neck with a fork, and then Aunt Charles would lecture me about proper table etiquette.

Which might lead to more fork stabbing.

And I knew for a fact that homicide was definitely against the rules.

Rosemary brought me a tray, but I didn't want to eat. I wanted to clean. It was what I did at home when I was this mad. I never normally cleaned. Only when I was furious. I suspected this led Bex to deliberately pick fights with me when she didn't want to wash the dishes.

But I had nothing to clean. Everything was already done. So pacing would have to do. I pressed a hand against my stomach, warning myself to not get too worked up. Because I had discovered a pattern—whenever I got close to a major tantrum, the stays and subsequent lack of oxygen made me faint.

It didn't help matters that as I remembered my quasi-altercation with Hartley, what I remembered was not necessarily how angry I was, but how sexy and imposing he had been. How throwing pillows had been not only out of spite but necessity. To keep him away from me. That even when the most idiotic things spewed out of his mouth like word vomit, I still wanted to climb onto his lap. When I'd woken up after passing out, having him so close did funny things to my stomach. And my heartbeat. And my knees.

I was pretty sure even my elbows had been affected by him.

Letting out an impatient groan, I wondered how many times I had hit my head against a hard surface as a child. How else could I possibly

explain wanting to be close to him but still wanting to wring his neck?

This was what happened when your dress was too tight. It stopped the flow of blood to your brain, and you were attracted to annoying know-it-all men. Somebody must have figured out that corsets and blood restriction were the only ways to keep the human species going while men acted like Hartley.

There was a knock at my door, which was unusual. I assumed Rosemary had come to help me undress. But she didn't knock. She scratched. Instead of yelling for her to come in, I decided to answer the door.

I couldn't have been more surprised to find Hartley waiting in my doorway.

Because this was breaking about a thousand of their rules. Not that he seemed really intent on following them, but I knew he expected me to. Good old sexist double standard. Regardless of his hypocrisy, this was highly inappropriate.

"What are you doing?" I hissed. I was torn between wanting to slam the door in his face and yanking him into my room so that no one saw him. Which would be worse. And would lead to one of Aunt Charles's "don't be compromised and/or ruined" speeches. I wasn't sure yet what all that entailed, as she was too embarrassed to give me any details, but I had my suspicions.

"Miss Blythe, I have come to apologize for my behavior earlier today. I behaved childishly and have no excuse for failing to act as a gentleman ought. I wanted to beg your forgiveness at supper this evening, but you did not come down. I thought it best to seek you out and make my apologies right away."

Yes, before the fork-stabbing massacre began. Good plan. Because I deflated at his sincere apology, like a balloon that had been full of fiery, hot steam until Hartley's words had poked a hole and all the anger gushed out, leaving me flat and too tired to resist.

If he was faking his apology out of some sense of obligation, he was a much better liar and actor than I could have imagined. Or I was a bigger sucker than I'd hoped.

That I was so quick to believe him and accept his apology made me wonder if it said something about me. Or about him.

Or about us.

Caught up in that new and scary train of thought, I couldn't think of anything to say. He took a step forward, causing my pulse to skitter and my breathing to hitch. "Stop!" I said, holding up both of my hands, panicked. "I have personal space issues."

"Personal what?"

"Personal space issues," I repeated, indicating the area around me with my hands. He was still standing too close, making my heartbeat thunder in my ears. "And you are encroaching on my bubble. Just, you know, stay there."

He raised that one eyebrow at me, letting me know I'd said something that had no translation. And then I saw that flicker of amusement, as if he understood that my nervousness had nothing to do with my bubble and more to do with him almost coming into my bedroom.

Which was a little bit right.

And while he didn't come in, he didn't exactly move back, either. I wondered what that meant.

"I would not want to encroach on anyone's 'bubble,' Miss Blythe. I only wanted to say that I was—"

"Being a jerk?" I offered.

Another smile that made my skin feel tight. "I am sorry for that. Even Aunt Charles agrees that I was most likely being a 'jerk.' But I was going to say that I was hopeful you could forgive me and we could continue on."

Some happy-puppy-leaping part of me jumped to attention. Continue on? Had something happened? Was that why he was standing so close to me that I could feel the warmth of him on my own skin? Did he think of me . . . that way?

"As soon-to-be in-laws," he finished.

Just like that, my heart sank into my toes. What had I expected? That he wanted us to continue on as . . . what? Pals? Good friends? A couple? I think his beauty constantly distracted me from remembering that I was only a means to an end for him. That I didn't matter and he didn't care about me.

That while I was wondering what it would feel like to have his strong, gorgeous lips pressed against mine, the feelings were definitely not mutual.

I let out a shaky breath and nodded at him. "No worries. All's forgiven. We're fine."

“My deepest gratitude for your magnanimous and kind spirit,” he said, bowing ever so slightly.

I didn’t return the gesture as I shut the door without even saying good night. I leaned against it and could feel him on the other side. What was wrong with me? I had a job to do. Keep the Portwood family happy while finding my way home. I wasn’t staying. There wasn’t a future for me with James or with Hartley. A little physical attraction didn’t mean anything.

I knew better. I understood the facts and the reality of this situation.

Then why, when he finally left, his boots heavy on the hallway floor, did I feel so broken up?

* * *

The next day I sat with Charles at writing desks that had been set up in the library for our use. It was something else we did besides visiting people, shopping, and eating dinner with Hartley. She wrote a lot of letters, probably as part of her “get Emma accepted by society” plan. I didn’t write any. Because who would I write them to? I pretended to write to my “father” and “friends back home” but never let anyone mail them off. I always said they weren’t done yet. But still I sat there pretending to write while she went through her mountain of correspondence and invitations.

Well, “write” was probably too strong of a word. Mostly I continued to spill ink and add to my ever-growing Rorschach blot collection.

And feel frustrated that I was again prevented from checking out the library. I kept doing random spot checks periodically, but either it was locked or Hartley was in there working, and I was not ready yet to face him alone. I was so embarrassed by the things I thought and felt that I was sure it was written all over my face.

And as he’d told me, Hartley enjoyed reading. I didn’t want him to read the truth on me. It would make things even awkward-er.

Sighing, I leaned back in my tiny chair. “Posture,” Charles reminded me, and I sat up, shaking my hands. She stopped to study me. “Is something the matter?”

“My wrists hurt,” I told her. “I don’t think this chair or this quill are ergonomically correct. I’m worried I’m getting carpal tunnel syndrome.”

She blinked at me a few times. “Did you just say you were getting some sort of fish syndrome?”

Before I could explain that I'd said "carpal," and not "carp," Stephens appeared out of nowhere like the butler wraith that he was. My heart slammed into my throat before settling back down. He was seriously going to give me a heart attack, and then I was going to die because there were no cardiothoracic surgeons.

"Mrs. Meriweather, Lady Penmere is here to see you."

That name sounded familiar. As a pretty blonde, brown-eyed woman entered the room, I recognized the resemblance and remembered as I stood up. She was Hartley's older sister. The married one. She greeted Charles and then nodded to me, removing her gloves. She took both of my hands in hers. I felt a slight shock, like static electricity. And it was such a sweet and open gesture that I wasn't sure how to respond. "I'm so pleased to make your acquaintance, Miss Blythe."

Her face was full of happiness and delight. It was probably what Hartley would look like if he ever stopped doing his Oscar the Grouch impersonation. "Me too. Charles has told me so much about you."

In a perfect impression of her younger brother, Lady Penmere raised one eyebrow in question.

"Yes, I call her Charles, and she calls me Emma." Why was this such a thing? "And yes, it makes your brother insane."

I was a little disconcerted by the mischief in her eyes. "Excellent. Then I must insist you call me Jane."

I noticed the little girl hiding behind Lady Penmere, er, I meant Jane's, skirts, and the governess or nanny (I had forgotten the correct term) carrying a baby boy. "These are my children, Lady Jemima, and the current Viscount Stratholme, whom for now we call Jacob."

More *J* names. It reminded me that I still needed to find out Hartley's.

"Penmere was busy?" Charles asked after she'd cooed over the baby. The nanny left to take him upstairs to the nursery and expected little Jemima to come as well, but Jane said she could stay if the little girl promised to behave. With big, brown eyes Lady Jemima nodded her head. Then she discovered Princess and began following the dog around the room. The corgi was only barely faster. I wondered which one of them would tire first.

"I mentioned a family visit, and he had plans he had forgotten," Jane said with an exaggerated sigh and a twinkle in her eye. "Always busy."

"I'm sure you have your hands full, too."

Hartley’s sister followed my gaze after I spoke and laughed at her daughter still pursuing the corgi while saying, “Come here, chicken, come here.”

“She talks really well. How old is she?” I asked.

Jane preened at the compliment to her little girl. “Just past two years. And she does speak very well, although you can see she still tends to confuse her animals.”

Charles pulled out her sewing bag, which had a bunch of white cloth in it. I suppressed my internal groan. Not sewing. Anything but sewing. I was already so bad at so many things that I hadn’t been able to admit to Charles that, outside of one semester in seventh grade that involved an actual machine, I’d never sewn anything in my life. That’s what factories were for.

The two women chatted about their family while they each grabbed a piece of cloth. Charles offered one of them to me. It seemed different than what I’d handled before. “What’s this?” I asked.

“We’re doing some mending while we visit. You can mend one of Hartley’s shirts.” I took his shirt and was surprised by how long it was. With those tight pants, I didn’t know how he managed to tuck it all in.

The shirt smelled like him, and I only barely refrained from sniffing it. He had this distinct scent, like sunshine mixed with soap and some other masculine thing I didn’t recognize, but which did silly things to the flutters in my belly.

“Don’t we have people for this?” I asked again, hoping this time I might get a different answer.

“Yes, we’re the people,” Charles drily reminded me. So I did what I imagined would be best but only managed to sew the collar to the body and leave tiny drops of blood all over his snowy-white shirt. This one was probably beyond saving now, but I was doing what they wanted me to do. Trying to fit in. Even if it was like trying to put a square peg into a dodecahedron hole.

Maybe some of that geometry *was* applicable to my real life.

“Speaking of animals,” Jane said, which was weird. We hadn’t talked about animals in a while. We’d been talking about doing stupid sewing, which made no sense given that we lived in a house full of servants. Who could serve. By sewing. I knew I would sound ungrateful, but I really

hated sewing by hand. “Do you happen to know where Sir Reginald is? I would love to see him again.”

That spooky cat was probably still hanging out somewhere in my room, plotting my demise so that he could eat my toes. But if it meant escaping, I would hog-tie Sir Reginald and drag him downstairs. “I’ll go look for him. Be right back.”

And by “right back” I meant three hours from now. When everything was mended.

When I got into the hallway, I realized that I had somehow sewn the arm of Hartley’s shirt to my dress, and it had snagged on something in the wall. A nail? I bent down to investigate, not wanting to do any more damage, when I heard the women speaking in low tones.

Jane spoke first. “Doesn’t she seem . . .”

“You noticed it as well. I thought I had lost my ability to detect it. Do you think she’s a . . .” What in the world was Charles talking about? What had they noticed about me? How did I seem? What did they think I was? I held my breath, still crouched next to the door. Whatever was happening, it sounded important.

“No,” Jane quickly responded. “But there is something around her. I felt it when I touched her. I am not certain what.”

They both fell silent, and my curiosity got the better of me. Straightening up, I walked into the room, ready to confront them, and just in time to see little Jemima levitating Princess toward her. “Chicken!” she called out happily as the dog floated to her outstretched arms.

“What did Mama tell you about . . .” Jane’s voice died when she saw me.

That had not just happened. It had not. “Did she . . . what . . . what was that? What’s happening?”

“We can explain,” Jane said in a tone that one would typically use only with a crazy person. But I wasn’t crazy. I wasn’t. I didn’t hallucinate. That had just happened. That girl had some kind of magic. There were no computers, no special effects. That had happened.

And to my surprise, I didn’t faint.

Instead, I looked at the women, they looked at me, Jemima squeezed the corgi that was nearly as big as she was, and I said, “I think there’s something I have to explain, too.”

CHAPTER ELEVEN

THINGS I'M GOING TO INVENT IF I GET STUCK IN 1816

Harry Potter. Because magic is real.

"I suppose the best place to start is at the beginning," Charles said as she shut the library door. Some part of my brain mentally inserted, "*Once upon a time*," as I was more than ready to hear the fairy tale about how a two-year-old was doing magic. Mrs. Farnsworth had been summoned to take Jemima and a very squished Princess to the nursery, and now the three of us sat on the couches. I was by myself, across from the others. "And there is no way to say it except to just say it. We are witches, Emma. The women in our family have always been witches."

Obviously, I was kind of expecting something like this because magic and witches went hand in hand. But it was still shocking. What were you supposed to say to, "Hi, my name is Charles, and I'm a witch?" Like we were in our very own chapter of Witches Anonymous?

"We are aligned with the elements, and our gifts are given randomly. Both Jane and Jemima are wind witches. I am a water witch, and Hartley's younger sisters manipulate fire and earth. Their mother was a fire witch, as well." She heaved a deep sigh before continuing. I wondered how she managed it with a corset on. "We work best with our element, and when we're young, sometimes it is difficult to contain our magic. As you just saw. But when we get married, everything changes."

"How does it change?"

"We lose most of our power." She exchanged glances with Jane, who nodded. "We can still do spells, some potions, but nothing like before. And strangely enough, our husbands become, for lack of a better word, extremely lucky. They amass incredible fortunes. Defeat their enemies with ease. Successes in whatever they put their hand to."

"And it didn't go unnoticed," Jane butted in, looking upset. "The women of our family were forced into subjugation first by chieftains and druids and then by kings and noblemen. The daughters were given as gifts to

whomever pleased the king. But to everyone's great consternation, the women in our family didn't bear sons, leaving the path for succession unclear and causing upheaval and chaos in the kingdom. Every time a king died, the throne was fought over by men who all had the same advantage in war, thanks to the women from our family. The devastation was terrible."

"Until a pirate fell in love with one of the king's daughters, as she did with him," Charles interrupted, excited by her own story. "Her father obviously forbade the union, so they ran away together and married. The princess had a son, and that was when sons began to be born in our family. Love had been the key to creating male heirs. The women decided to protect their families and future offspring, and all agreed to take herbs to prevent the birth of any more daughters. Then they ran away from their husbands and captors. Until their secret was once again hidden and everyone forgot."

Jane leaned forward. "And since then, the women in our family have only ever married for love. Their mothers make certain, so that they know the men are worthy of the gift they will receive from the marriage."

It was unbelievable, but a very cool story. I would totally watch this movie. Even if it was a lot to process. "Does your husband know?" Did Hartley?

At that, both women chuckled. "The men do not know. Not the husbands, sons, brothers, not any of them," Jane told me. "We learned to keep our secrets to ourselves. I have found it highly necessary to maintain the illusion my husband currently has of me, and I would hope he would do the same."

She was joking, but she must have loved her husband, and he must have loved her. Or else Jacob wouldn't exist. Which made another thought occur to me. I looked at Charles. "Wait, you said you had six sisters. Does that mean your parents didn't love each other?"

"My mother wanted to be a duchess more than anything else in the world. And her parents spoiled her and never denied her anything. She found a duke, and her dowry was enough to entice my father, who had a title but thanks to a bad gambling habit, not many funds. The marriage was allowed. And while I think they eventually grew fond of each other, I do not think they were ever in love. Not as I was with my husband," Charles said with a wistful tone.

The admiral. Hadn’t she said her element was water? It made sense that she married a man who lived his life at sea. I heard the rain outside, there like always, hitting the windows.

I turned to look at the blurred view. My world had just literally been rocked. Not only had I time traveled, but there were witches. And magic. I had obviously suspected that magic had to be real given my current circumstances, but some part of me hadn’t really believed it. I had resigned myself to staying here and copyrighting the Harry Potter and Star Wars series and making a fortune. Although if I had been stuck in 1816 and had been forced to marry James, I probably never would have to worry about money. The Portwoods were loaded. As were the Meriweathers.

“And it’s why you’re all rich. That transference of power or whatever happens when you get married.”

“Yes.” Charles nodded, folding the long piece of linen she had worked on. “But that only lasts for as long as the wife is living.”

“When my mother died, my father squandered all his fortune. He died penniless not long after. It’s why Hartley had to begin traveling, as he was determined to restore what was lost. And he has,” Jane said, her voice shaking slightly as anger set in. “Even though that lying, despicable, cheating little tart didn’t deserve his devotion or his attempts to give her the lifestyle she believed she deserved.”

Whoa. Where had that come from? I definitely wanted to explore that more. Was the cheating little tart the elusive Miss Amesbury the Vase Giver who had made him not want to get married ever?

Charles put her hand on top of Jane’s arm, like she was trying to calm her down, and said, “They say one should not speak ill of the dead.” Jane looked chastened until Charles went on. “But I believe Miss Amesbury warrants an exception.”

It was Miss Amesbury! But before I could ask questions, Charles spoke to me. “I hope you understand and appreciate that we have taken a great risk in telling you the truth. I have found you to be a very trustworthy woman, one that I hope to make part of my family someday. I want you to know that this trust extends both ways. That whatever you said you would like to explain will obviously be kept between us.”

Even as my heart glowed with the idea that Charles and Jane trusted me, that they saw me as somebody who could be in their family, my lizard brain was still panicking. It would alleviate so much of my constant

anxiety to get this off my chest, to have someone know who I really was. Even if it was scary.

"Yeah. I mean, yes. I do have something I need to tell you." I didn't even know how to explain that I was from the future. I didn't think they had any science fiction yet. "I'm not from where you think I'm from."

Charles frowned, not taking my meaning. "You're not American?"

"Oh no. I'm American. I'm just from the America in 2017. The one that will exist two hundred years from now."

Several moments passed in silence until Jane said, "I'm not certain I understand."

"I was born in the year 1996. In 2017, I was working here, at Hartley Hall, which in my time is a museum. I went upstairs, put on an old-fashioned dress, read what I now believe was a spell, and wound up here. Hartley thinks I'm some girl named Emily Blythe, and he wants me to marry James. I'm sorry that I lied and went along with it. I didn't know what else to do. I just want to get back home." It all came out in one big rush, like the words were fleeing my body, desperate to be shared with the world.

Both women wore expressions that I was sure mirrored the one I'd been sporting for the last ten minutes. Shock. Disbelief. And was that a tiny smidge of acceptance?

"You're saying that you've come here from the future?" Jane asked.

"Yes," I nodded. The relief was a palpable thing. I had hated lying to everyone, especially Charles. And given what they'd shared with me, I didn't think they'd try to lock me up. And they probably had a strong aversion to stake burning. "I can prove it to you. I have stuff locked up in my room that can prove it. But it's why I don't know how to do anything. Why I don't know the rules or have any manners." I pointed at my skirt, which still had Hartley's shirt attached to it. "I can't sew. I can't use a quill, and I can't dance. I'm trying hard to learn, but this has all been really difficult."

To my surprise, there were tears at the edges of my eyes. I hadn't realized until that moment just how hard everything had been on me. Emotionally and physically. It was why I collapsed into bed every night and immediately fell asleep. My voice went wobbly. "I know it's a lot to ask that you believe me, but I'm not crazy, and I'm not making it up. And

you have a really nice time period and everything, but all I want is to get back."

Charles stood, the black muslin of her dress rustling as she moved around the table in order to sit down next to me. She put a hand on my shoulder. "Emma, my dear, of course we believe you. We do not require proof. More than anyone, we know the sorts of things magic is capable of. I only wish you had told me sooner. What can we do to assist you in your endeavor?"

I wanted to collapse against her in gratitude. I felt comforted and not alone, for the first time in a very long time. But now that my shock at what they had told me had worn off, I saw the upside. I didn't have to be stuck here. Magic was real. Witches who could wield magic were real. It was actually possible for me to get back.

"I thought if a spell got me here, a spell would probably send me back home. Can you guys do that?"

Jane gave me a sad little smile. "We lack the power it would take to create such a spell." Her glance flicked over to Charles. "Do you think the twins might be capable of doing something like this?"

"No," Charles replied firmly. "Julia might be able to help, if we could lure her away from the estate and her plants, but Jessica is far too distracted and undisciplined at the moment. Not to mention that she has been sent to stay with relatives, and I think it best she stay there for the time being."

Understanding lit up Jane's face, but I didn't get it.

"I know it's none of my business, but what happened with Jessica?" I knew it wasn't good when girls were sent to live with relatives.

"She set her cap at a vain spendthrift who did not love her, despite her best efforts. He was rather fond of her dowry, however. He is currently in London, and as such, Jessica should not be," Charles responded.

"Couldn't Jessica just make some love potion?"

A clock chimed, and Jane began to pack up Charles's sewing bag. "Although there have been a fair number of husbands who have claimed to be bewitched by women in our family, there are two areas witches have no dominion over: love and death. We cannot control or affect either one."

Charles asked Jane for scissors. She dug around the bottom of the bag until she found a pair and handed them over. Charles started disentangling me from Hartley's torn, blood-speckled shirt. "Love itself is a power that

witches can use to increase the potency of their spells. Trust me, if I could create a spell to make Hartley fall in love again, I would. Regardless, sons of witches are impervious to magic. Nothing can pierce their cursed, stubborn, dragon-skin hides."

Something still didn't make sense. "But I'm not a witch," I said as Charles pulled the shirt clear. "I can't do magic. I can't cast spells. How did I get here?"

Charles gave both the seam ripper and the shirt back to Jane, who returned them to the bag before replying to me. "We know you're not a witch. But you did cast a significant spell. I felt it today when I first touched you. And some spells are so powerful that anyone could speak them and they would work. But they're rare."

"While I have never heard of anyone going through time, it would take a great deal of magic and a tremendous amount of love to make something like that happen." Charles looked thoughtful. As if she were working something out. "Something allowed you to come here."

"Allowed?" I repeated. "By who?"

"By whom, my dear."

I couldn't help it. I groaned in disgust and rolled my eyes, even though I knew it was textbook rude. "This is no time for grammar! Dogs have been levitated! Time has been traveled!"

"There is always time for proper grammar. Our lessons will continue. It sounds as if I need to engage a dance master, as well."

Charles could not be serious. "You just completely altered my world and accepted the possibility of a space-time continuum, but you're still planning on trying to launch me into society and tricking James into marrying me?"

Apparently, she was serious. "Of course. If we stopped, Hartley would want to know why. And he is far too clever to be put off by lies or half-truths for very long. I think it best for now that we go on as we already are. Until we find a way to send you home."

She would probably correct me, but I fell back against the sofa, slouching. Charles must have decided to give me a pass, because all I got was a pointed look. I stayed put. "If you can't do the magic to get me back, then my working theory has been that there must be some kind of book of spells. And that I could find the book and the spell. Do you have anything like that?"

“I do not, but Eleanor, Hartley and Jane’s mother, was an avid collector of magic books. Real and pretend. It’s one of the reasons the library is so vast. She bought other types of books so that no one would suspect what she was up to.”

Jane scooted forward to the edge of the couch, like she was ready to leap off and start looking herself. “How exciting! I have some at home that she gave me. I shall bring them at the very first opportunity, and we can go through them.”

“And we will start devoting part of our day to searching the library. When Hartley isn’t here,” Charles added, still with that evaluating expression. “And if we are unable to find what you need, you could do much worse than being married to Hartley.”

“James,” I said. Was she doing that on purpose?

“Oh yes. James. That’s what I meant to say. Why would I say Hartley?” She was trying to play it off, but I heard the phoniness behind her protest.

Now that I knew she was a witch, it freaked me out when Hartley threw open the library doors and strode in. Like she had conjured him up by saying his name. I sat straight up, pulse racing.

“Jane!” he said with a grin, greeting her. “Stephens said you were here. Where are my favorite niece and nephew?”

“They are your only niece and nephew,” Jane said with a laugh, ringing for the nanny to bring the children back. I didn’t want to participate in their conversation. I had just been silently accusing Charles of being a phony. But I was the phony. I was the one who lied through her teeth every moment of every day. While Hartley had taken me in and clothed and fed me. Yes, sometimes he was a jerk, but on the whole, he was a lot more generous than I had any right to expect. I hated keeping this from him. Going through the motions of something I had no intention of actually doing. Lying to him all the time. And I didn’t love him the way that Charles and Jane did. The way his mother had. How did they keep this big of a secret from people they cared about?

I sometimes thought that feeling ashamed of my actions was the reason I would get into it with Hartley. Some of it was because he said annoying, obnoxious things, but I didn’t like deceiving him. Using him. Although, to be fair, he intended to use me, too.

But he’d at least been up-front and honest about it. My dishonesty and guilt curled up low in my gut, twisting and writhing into uncomfortable

shapes.

“Will you be staying to dine with us?” he asked his sister.

She said her husband was expecting them home soon and that the nanny insisted on keeping to a regular schedule for Jacob’s bedtime, so she politely declined.

A moment later, the nanny brought in the kids, and Hartley swooped down, picking up Jemima and twirling her around once in a circle. She laughed and shrieked, bringing a smile to all the adults in the room. His face . . . I’d never seen him so happy. Like he’d forgotten to be broody and morose. He went over and planted a kiss on the top of Jacob’s head, who gave his uncle a toothless grin.

Something whispered to me that this was the real Hartley. The sarcastic, self-serving, withdrawn one was the mask, and this was the actual man. The one who loved his family. Who adored children. Who was excited and caring. Who forgot to scowl and be rude and was just happy.

And for some reason, that made everything I was currently feeling a thousand times worse.

CHAPTER TWELVE

THINGS I'M GOING TO INVENT IF I GET STUCK IN 1816

Hospitals. With real doctors.

Eventually, the disgust with myself began to wear off. I didn't really have a choice. There was no way to tell him about what had happened to me that he would understand. And I didn't want to betray the trust that had been given to me by telling him about the magic that had made the time traveling possible. I rationalized it as best as I could and kept looking for the right book. Charles helped me search, and Jane brought over what she had. So far we hadn't found anything, and our time was limited by Hartley's presence. He seemed to be home more and more as the days went on. Which I liked more than I should have, but it was making it impossible for me to find what I was looking for.

Even though my life had so radically changed, I was discovering that I didn't miss the constant white noise and dinging interruptions of technology. There was a stillness here, a quiet that made everything easier. Mellower. My life was like being in college full-time only without the tests or the tuition fees. And I got to study history all the time. Well, it wasn't technically history. More like current events. With lots of incredible original documents thrown in. I couldn't believe the extent of the Portwood collection. Every day I found some new treasure that would elicit at least one "wow."

The lessons and training continued, and Charles hired a Mr. Watson to teach me all of those complicated line dances. Even though I'd never had any dance training growing up, it turned out I was a natural, and the dance practices became one of my favorite times of the day.

My other favorite parts were the ones where I got to hang out in the library and lounge. With Hartley. He and I were getting along better. He hadn't said anything infuriating, and I hadn't thrown anything else at him. When it wasn't directed at me, I loved his biting wit. And that I was getting more glimpses of the real Hartley.

The downside to that was that my attraction to him had reached dizzying heights. I spent a lot of time fantasizing about kissing him. Dancing with him. Cuddling next to him on the couch while we read books together. Running my fingers through his sun-kissed hair or down the (presumably) corded muscles in his strong arms. Going on a date that didn't end five minutes after we arrived.

Or him smiling at me the way he smiled at Jemima. You could tell how much he adored her. I was deeply jealous of the two-year-old who had him wrapped around her little finger.

The worst was when he caught me staring at him, and instead of saying anything, he just had this little half smile, and his blue eyes danced like he knew exactly what was going through my head and he thought it was funny. I still loved making him smile but didn't like when it was at my expense.

Sometimes it seemed like I caught him staring at me, too. I wanted to chalk it up to my overactive imagination, but it did happen. I didn't know what it meant, and he never made any kind of move like he was interested, but it did make me feel less pathetic.

Like now. I looked up from the book I'd been reading because he had moved from his desk to retrieve a paper that had fallen on the opposite side, close to where I sat. When he straightened, he looked at me, and the fiery intensity in his gaze would have knocked me over if I hadn't already been sitting. There was a hunger there. Like he was starving and I was a filet mignon. The air between us solidified, making it hard to breathe. It crackled with tension and electricity until it was almost too much to take. I couldn't help but lean in his direction, drawn to him and to whatever was happening between us. And it lasted for what felt like an eternity, until he sat back down without saying anything.

It was all I could think about for the rest of the day. Why did he look at me like that? And why was it only when we were alone? Even through dinner, while he and Charles carried on a lively conversation, I was still trying to figure out what his deal was.

He was very confusing.

Not just with the staring stuff, but things like the footmen's names. He called all of them William.

"That's Jamie," I corrected him.

"As far as I'm concerned, they're all William."

“You do know Stephens didn’t hire a bunch of guys who just happened to have the same name, right?” I got that it made his life easier, but it didn’t seem like it would be that hard to remember the names of the people who lived in your house.

Dinner ended, and like so many other nights, Charles and I were expected to “go through” to the drawing room while Hartley stayed behind. Sometimes he came with us, but sometimes he didn’t join us for a while. I didn’t get it. It also wasn’t a topic that Charles had covered yet.

“What is it men do when the women leave?” I asked as the servants cleared the table and left the dining room. “What’s the big secret?”

Hartley looked at me like he was trying to decide whether to be honest or mess with me. He went with teasing. “Manly things.”

“Like what?” I retorted. “Belching and talking about sex?”

My deliberate mention of a forbidden topic caused him to choke on his drink. But I saw his smile. I didn’t even bother to check out Charles’s expression. She was probably going to give me a time-out later. If I hadn’t already given her a coronary. “I can do that, too.”

“Belch?” he asked, ever so politely.

I narrowed my eyes at him. “Talk about sex. I haven’t done it yet, but I know enough.”

“Should we go riding tomorrow?” he asked, ignoring my response. That desire to provoke him was back. I wanted his attention solely on me. More of what he’d given me earlier. I could just explain to Charles later that it was not as big of a deal in the future as it was here.

“Don’t change the subject. Women are just as good as men. We can do anything men can do.” I paused. “Except write our names in the snow with our pee. But I bet if I really put my mind to it, I could even do that.”

Charles gasped, but Hartley looked like he was about to break out in real laughter. “Is that so? Then by all means, let us act like equals.”

That he agreed so quickly to revealing his secret ritual had me concerned. “What is it we’re going to do?”

“Drink port. Some men also smoke, but I abhor it. Apparently, it is an unwritten law that all men must imbibe copious amounts of port after dinner.” At Hartley’s signal, a servant approached, carrying three glasses and a bottle of alcohol.

“Why?”

“They need the liquid courage before they are forced to rejoin the women.”

“Pour me a glass,” I said, teeth clenched.

“Aunt Charles?” he asked, and she nodded.

“I’ve never much cared for it, but Emma is right. Women are as good as men. And when in Rome.”

“You should probably be careful,” he said, handing the glass to me. The only thing I was careful about was to take it without touching him.

“I’ve never actually had alcohol before,” I said, tasting a little bit of it. It was disgusting. But I couldn’t back down now.

That statement made him freeze. Charles, fortunately, had stopped reacting whenever I said anything weird or shocking, now that she knew the truth about me. “You’ve never had any alcohol? Not even watered-down wine?” he asked.

“Nope. I mean, no. My parents, or, my mother was killed by a drunk driver. In a car, er, carriage accident. So I’ve never really been interested in the stuff.”

It was a moment before he responded. “My deepest condolences on your loss, Miss Blythe.”

“Mine as well, my dear,” Charles added.

“Thank you.” I would not cry. I wouldn’t.

He held up his glass of port. “To Mrs. Blythe.” I held up my glass and internally added, *to Mom and Dad*. He knocked the whole thing back, and so did I. Which ended up being a huge mistake, as it burned my esophagus and made my eyes water. I started coughing, and that amused smile of his was back.

“Another?” he asked, his tone indicating he didn’t think I could take it. If he’d been a frat boy, I’d have assumed he was trying to get me drunk and/or planned on roofie-ing me. But I knew my virtue was completely safe. Hartley just thought it was funny. I slammed my glass down and shoved it toward him, trying to regain my ability to breathe. Charles also pushed her glass toward him, even though she had a grimace on her face.

He again knocked it back, and I again copied him. More burning. Only this time, a pleasant, warm sensation started in the middle of my stomach and spread outward. It was nice. Within moments, I felt the most relaxed I’d felt since I’d arrived. Even with the corset on.

“A third?”

I should have stopped. I just couldn’t back down. So he poured again for all of us, and this time it didn’t burn so much going down. I just felt super mellow.

“Shall we go through?” he asked, offering us his arms. I stood up, and my head spun. I leaned against the table for support until everything was back where it was supposed to be. I needed his arm to walk straight.

I was drunk. I had to be. I never had been before, and it was strange. It felt like it had happened really quickly. It probably didn’t help that I had only picked at my dinner. My limbs felt loose, and my cheeks felt warm. This was nice.

Princess came into the drawing room with us, following behind Charles. Charles sat in a chair next to the fireplace, and the dog jumped up into her lap. Hartley and I sat on a couch near her. The fire blazed brightly while the rain fell outside. He shifted and pulled a book out from under his leg. He read the title, and I didn’t recognize the language. “Was that Klingon?”

“Latin,” he said and put it on the table. “What is ‘Klingon’?”

“Alien language. Hard to explain. You speak Latin?” He nodded. “How many languages do you speak?”

He paused, thinking. It was weird, but he seemed different, too. Relaxed, like me. Not as uptight.

Although that may have been a skewed perception due to my inebriation.

“English, French, some Greek and Latin. Only a smattering of German, I’m afraid. And you?”

“Dude,” I said, stunned. “That’s a lot. I only speak English.”

“I’m not certain I’d call what you speak English.”

I nudged him with my shoulder, and he laughed. He totally and completely laughed.

And it was a glorious sound. Although that may have been the booze talking. Because my tongue was swelling up in my mouth. “I think my numb is tongue,” I informed him. He laughed again, and I loved the way his eyes sparkled in this light. I had really missed electricity, but there was something to be said about sitting in a darkened room with only some candles and the fireplace for light.

Über-romantic.

“Did you enjoy your port? Are we equals now?” he asked, the merriment still there in his voice.

“I feel . . . very calm. Port is nice.”

“You won’t think so tomorrow.”

Possibly. But for now, it was nice.

“Why do you keep touching your gown?” he asked, and I looked down, not aware that I’d been doing it. I was running my fingers back and forth across my dress.

“Because it’s so soft. I don’t know what material this is, but I think I want to have its baby. You should feel it.”

I hadn’t meant anything by it, but everything in the room changed when I said it. The air was charged again, and he reached out like he was going to, but then stopped. The tension threatened to drown me.

Fortunately, I was saved by the snore. Both Charles and Princess had fallen asleep. For some reason this struck me as unbelievably funny, and I started to giggle. “Is that sound coming from the dog or Charles?”

He wanted to laugh again. I could see it. But he only said, “Of all the impertinent . . .” A sentence he didn’t finish.

“What was in that port? I feel like I shouldn’t be this drunk. Are you sure it wasn’t liquid crack?”

“It was a rather potent variety, I’m afraid.” He was still teasing. He’d done this on purpose. Gotten me drunk. Not to have his way with me, which I probably would have liked. Just to prove some idiotic point.

I decided I was okay with it.

The warm, loose feeling got stronger, and I sighed. “To think of all the parties I avoided because I didn’t drink.” I leaned back against the couch, letting my head settle. “Do you have parties here?”

“We do. You’ve been to them.”

“I don’t mean the dancing kind. I mean the fun kind. Like with balloons and cake or the junior high ones with games. Like spin the bottle.”

It felt like he had moved closer to me. Or my depth perception was seriously off. “What is spin the bottle?”

“You take an empty bottle, put it on the ground, and spin it. Whoever it lands on, you have to kiss that person.” I paused, realizing the gravity of this moment, and gasped. “Did I just invent that game? Am I the inventor of spin the bottle?”

He was definitely closer. Because my drunken warmth got stronger from his body heat. “I don’t think that sounds like an appropriate party game.”

“You wouldn’t,” I said, closing my eyes. “I need to ask you something. How old are you?”

“Five and twenty.”

“You could just say twenty-five. The other way’s confusing. And what is your first name?”

I expected to be admonished for asking such personal questions. “Jaxon. It was my mother’s maiden name.”

“Jaxon,” I repeated. “That’s a nice name. But you’re kind of Hartley to me now. I can’t think of you as Jaxon.”

Mystery solved. I opened my eyes again to look at him. He was staring at the fire, watching the flames. I turned to watch them leap and dance, too. Apparently being drunk made me chatty. “You seem different lately. When I first got here you always seemed grouchy and sad. Now you seem happier.”

He nodded but didn’t answer.

“Why did you used to be sad?”

“Because I was responsible for my fiancée’s death.”

That made me sit up. I kicked off my shoes and tucked my legs underneath me, facing him. Technically we weren’t alone as per his lounging rules, but I was going to allow it because Charles was passed out. “Would you tell me about it?”

He turned, and the full force of his gaze did funny things to my nerve endings. Then he did the most surprising thing ever.

No, he didn’t kiss me (I’d been hoping for that, too). He actually confided in me. “Miss Elizabeth Amesbury and I grew up together. She was from a poor but genteel family in the village. I’d loved her from the time that we were children and had always planned to marry her. When we were of age, she consented. My parents did not approve, but I was determined. Libby wouldn’t marry me until things had been mended with my family. She said she didn’t want to be the cause of any rift between us.”

Ha. Given the low opinion both Jane and Charles had about her, my guess was that she didn’t want them to fight because she didn’t want Hartley to be cut off.

“Then my mother died, and my father, and our fortune was gone. I knew Libby was not prepared to stay impoverished for the rest of her life. I promised her that I would get it all back and asked her to wait for me.”

I didn’t need to be psychic to know how this was going to turn out. Spoiler alert—Libby didn’t wait.

“I went out into the world, engaging in trade and business. It was rather unthinkable for a man in my position, but I did not want my wife, my sisters, or any future heirs to suffer. When I had accomplished what I set out to do, I returned home to find her a married woman. In my absence she had jilted me to marry George Godwin.” George Godwin was that guy who came up to us at the ball and basically called me a whore. And I totally nailed the her-not-waiting thing. “I did my best to avoid her, but she sought me out. A week after I came back, she confessed that she had made a grave mistake.”

No doubt. I’d seen both men, and it was like putting a 40-watt light bulb next to the sun. There was no comparison. And since Hartley had become rich again, that probably put him over the top.

“She told me that he was unkind to her. Had harmed her. I wanted to call him out then and there, but she begged me not to. She wanted to run away. Leave England behind and find somewhere to start over.”

That would have been asking him to leave behind his family. A family that he clearly adored. Give up his title, which I knew was important to him. Abandon all his responsibilities, and I saw on a daily basis how seriously he took those. She sounded really selfish.

“And I—” His voice broke. It surprised me. He didn’t seem like the kind of guy who got emotional. I put my hand on top of his, holding it. He looked down at our hands, but he didn’t return the embrace. He also didn’t move away. “I agreed.” His voice was little more than whisper. “We arranged to meet and ride for the docks in London. But when I arrived . . . when I arrived she was dead.”

I gasped in horror. “Did that George guy kill her? Wasn’t that what you said he did?”

“Not in the way you’re suggesting. When I said he’d killed her, I meant he’d driven her to run away. And the running away was what ended her life. Which makes me even more responsible than him. She’d had an accident. Most likely thrown from her horse. I arrived, and she was dead, lying in a pool of her own blood.” He let out a shaky breath, and I tightened my hold on his hand. “I picked her up, and I carried her to the nearest cottage. It was the last time I ever saw her.”

I was about to tell him that he shouldn’t have moved her, but stopped. What else could he have done? There were no ambulances. No EMTs, no hospitals that would actually fix you, no medical equipment, and no surgeons.

A shudder went through me at that realization. I really needed to get back home.

“It was the most dishonorable, despicable thing I’ve ever done in my entire life, and it cost me what I’d loved most.” His eyes flashed, angry. “And that is why I will never marry. I will never go through something like that ever again.”

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

THINGS I'M GOING TO INVENT IF I GET STUCK IN 1816

Hangover cure

Her hand again tightened on his. Hartley was more tempted than he ought to be to turn his hand over and lace his fingers through hers.

The desire was strengthened when Emma said, "My deepest condolences on your loss," just as he had said to her at supper. For a moment, he didn't have the words to respond. He swallowed back the emotion that was so close to the surface and just sat next to her, watching the fire.

The grandfather clock in the hallway sounded. "It's late," he said. She looked at her left wrist. It was something he often saw her do, usually whenever someone mentioned the time. He didn't know what concerned him more—that she did something so odd or that he was so aware of her behaviors.

Either way, it was time to bring this evening to a close. "May I escort you back to your room?" He stood and offered to help her up. She waved away his hands.

"I'm totally fine. I got this."

She did not, however, have it. She immediately listed to one side, and he grabbed her, keeping her upright. He felt the urge to smile but refrained. "What is wrong with me?" she asked.

"At the moment? Large amounts of port." When they reached the foyer, he sent two Williams to assist his aunt back to her room.

He found it necessary to slip one arm around Emma's waist to maintain their progress. At least, that was what he told himself. It had nothing to do with how she felt pressed against his side, or how soft the skin of her arm felt when it brushed against his hand, or that intoxicating new scent she had taken to wearing.

He was only being a gentleman and doing what any gentleman would.

“This might be my first time drinking, but I used to hang out with guys like this back when I’m from. But sober.”

She spoke so queerly. She often made it sound as if she’d arrived from another planet. He had been to America. To her hometown of Boston, even. Other than the strange accents, he did not see a significant difference in their lifestyles. He wondered if she was trying to shock him again, as she had at dinner. He was finding it to be something he liked about her. That he never quite knew what was going to come out of her mouth, and she somehow managed to constantly surprise him.

And amuse him.

He couldn’t remember the last time he had laughed or smiled as much as he had since her arrival.

He also couldn’t believe that he had told her about Libby. It was not a story he shared often, and certainly not with a woman he had known for such a short amount of time. He told himself that it was because of the alcohol or because she would soon be family, but that wasn’t the reason. He had wanted to tell her. For her to understand one of the most significant events of his life.

And he didn’t know why.

As if she could intuit his very thoughts, she announced, “I’ve been thinking.”

“Yes, I can smell your thinking from here.”

She tried to smack him on the chest but missed. “I think. Very deep, serious thoughts. Like I don’t think it’s fair that you called her by her first name, and you won’t call me Emma. Not even once.”

They had reached her bedroom door. The intelligent thing to do would be to bid her good night and leave. She let go of him, and he found himself feeling the loss. She leaned against her door, looking up at him through her lashes.

“Emma,” he said, the word low and sounding more like a caress than he had intended it to. A bewitching smile lit up all her features, and she let out a satisfied sigh.

“Finally,” she breathed. Then she did something totally unexpected. She reached up and wrapped her arms around his neck. He immediately put his hands on her forearms, intending to pull them off, but found he lacked both the strength and the desire to follow through. “You know,” she went on, “sometimes I can’t tell whether you want to strangle me or kiss me.”

He took a step closer to her as she pulled him in. “I have no wish to strangle you.” His words were husky even to his own ears.

In that moment, she became his entire world. He forgot that they stood in the darkened hallway of his home where anyone could come across them. Forgot about his brother and forgot about his scheme. He let his hands again slide around her waist, feeling the feminine warmth of her even through layers of clothes. Her scent whispered and flirted with his senses, driving them mad.

“There was another thing I was thinking,” she said in a breathy tone that made his skin feel too tight for his body. “I was thinking it might be nice to kiss you.”

And despite the fact that they were positioned perfectly to do exactly that, he said, “Kiss me?” as if it surprised him.

“You do have that here, right? Kissing?”

“We have kissing,” he murmured, lifting one hand to trace the outline of her delicate ear. He felt her shiver against his fingers, and he found it hard to remember how to breathe properly. “But we can’t.”

“Why not?”

Yes, why not? his body demanded. There were many reasons why not. He just lacked the ability to recall any of them as she pressed herself against him, all curves and softness that would be his undoing. “You’re foxed,” was all he could manage.

“Does that mean drunk? I am not as think as you drunk I am,” she insisted.

“Yes, obviously.”

She didn’t see the humor, and in that moment, neither did he. If he had not seriously considered kissing her before, he certainly was now. He reached up to capture an escaped tendril of her hair, luxuriating in the discovery that it was as silky as he had hoped it would be.

“If you’re worried about whether or not I know what I’m doing, I’ve kissed lots of boys before.” She breathed the words against his neck, and shivers of pleasure danced across his skin.

“I am no boy.”

Then she ever so softly, ever so sweetly, ever so gently, pressed her lips against his. He was too shocked for a moment to do anything, and she quickly retreated. “Mmm. That was nice.”

“Nice” had been her favorite word for the evening. Nice was an apt word. It had been nice. Comforting, almost. Like sitting in his favorite armchair on a cold night next to a fireplace.

This was the moment to take his leave. To walk away and regain control of himself. But then she kissed him again, pressing her delectable lips against his, and he couldn’t help but respond. No man could have withstood such temptation. He heard her breathing catch when he put his hand on the back of her neck and pulled her to him, crushing her mouth against his. Her lips were full, delicious, and supple. She tasted of port and, oddly enough, mint. He found that he liked the taste. Craved it. Wanted more.

It stopped being merely nice.

She strained against him, holding him tightly, making a sound in her throat that set his blood ablaze. His heart thundered as unleashed lightning shot through him, singeing every part of his being. Then the heat sank into his bones, and he had to place one hand against the doorframe to keep himself vertical. She fit perfectly against him, as if she had been born for that very purpose. Heat and desire coursed through him, accompanied by an intense wanting that threatened to consume his eternal soul.

Emma had not been mistaken. She did indeed know what she was doing, and it drove him to distraction. Especially when she ran her fingers along his scalp, sending little tingles of ecstasy shooting down his veins. Her fingers moved to the nape of his neck, kneading the skin there, turning his knees hollow. A dizzying hunger unfurled in his gut, urging him on, insisting he take more.

And everything he wordlessly asked for, she gave.

The kiss itself became fire, seemingly harmless when it had been small and contained, but now it raged with the potential to burn down the house around him if he set it loose. And that was what he wanted. To lose control. To let it all burn. The muscles in his abdomen clenched and unclenched as she moaned his name against his mouth, the sound echoing in his chest. Trails of wildfire were unleashed as she ran her fingers down his neck, over his shoulders, and down his torso. Pure, unadulterated desire exploded inside him, overwhelming him.

His lungs constricted as breathing became nearly impossible. He wanted nothing more than to open her bedroom door and do what his body was

screaming for. It would be so easy to do, and the images that flooded his mind made it the only thing in the world he wanted to do.

But he could not. He would not. Never in his life had he taken advantage of a drunken woman or an untouched maiden, and he was certainly not going to start now. It wasn't proper. Or right. Taking her to bed went against his own moral code of conduct, not to mention society's. He had no intention of ruining her.

There would be no harm done if he stopped. The kiss had been innocent, even if his reaction to it had not been. So, reluctantly, he released her, breaking off their intoxicating embrace. She slumped against the bedroom door. He had kissed other young, unmarried women at balls and parties, and it had been meaningless. Only a bit of fun. This was the same.

Not even he believed that lie. He stepped back, willing his limbs to stop shaking. Her lips were full and swollen, slightly parted. Several hair pins had fallen. Her breathing was ragged, still excited. She looked as if she had been thoroughly and soundly kissed, and it took every ounce of his self-control to not return to her.

"I beg your pardon," he said. "I should not have kissed you."

"In case you missed it, it was me who kissed you. And I think I did a pretty good job of it."

She certainly had. Without question. "I am not quite myself. I do not enjoy drinking as much as most men do. When I was fourteen, James and I broke into our father's liquor cabinet and made ourselves sick. I do it when occasion calls for it, but I prefer to stay away from it."

Emma understood his meaning, and she narrowed her eyes at him. "So you did only drink that much to make some stupid point?"

He nodded, agreeing with her assessment. "Which I should not have done, and I apologize. We were both impaired this evening, and that kiss should not have happened. It cannot happen again."

"I wanted to kiss you. Which is why I did." She shook her head. "I can't believe I just said that out loud. Is this stuff like some kind of truth serum?"

Her eyes were heavy lidded, and she reached out to touch him. He took another step back, staying out of reach. The temptation was almost more than he could bear. If he hadn't already crossed the line, he had come very close to it, and it had to be stopped.

Even if he wanted nothing more than to forsake propriety and honor and carry her into her room.

Hartley reminded himself of the fact that he had just told her what had happened the last time he decided to forsake propriety and his honor. As if he hadn't learned his lesson at all. As if being a gentleman didn't matter. As if he wouldn't destroy lives if he couldn't master himself.

"Here's another truth bomb for you. I'm pretty sure I'm about to puke."

Puke? He only had a moment to wonder what that meant before she tossed her accounts all over his new Hessian boots.

* * *

When I woke the next morning, I sat straight up, which scared Sir Reginald. He hissed at me and leaped from my pillow, running under the bed.

The first thing I noticed was that my head felt like it had turned into a steel drum that was being banged on repeatedly. The next was that my tongue had been encased in a layer of gross, like some elf had custom-made a tiny fur coat for it.

I groaned and then immediately clapped my hands over my ears, because the sound increased the drumming pain.

No more drinking. No more peer pressure. I would just say no.

Drinking was stupid. Port was stupid.

Then I remembered something else.

That kiss.

Bex's romance books had been totally right. Bones melting. Veins exploding. Blood pulsing. Heart bursting. Loins . . . doing whatever it was that loins did.

It had easily been the best and most intense kiss of my entire life. So intense that I could still feel the imprint of his lips against mine, and they tingled as I recalled every single detail.

Either he was the world's best kisser, or I'd been a lot drunker than I'd thought. Because it had been like magic.

Right up until the moment when I vomited on him. I wanted to groan again but didn't want to inflict any more pain on myself. My own stupidity at kissing Hartley was already causing enough.

I'd attacked him, and then I'd "befouled his person," as Charles might say. He must have carried me to bed. Again while I was unconscious. And he'd probably had Rosemary clean me up and loosen my corset, as I was still wearing it but could breathe. Given that I didn't smell anything putrid, he'd probably had somebody clean up the hallway, too.

The things I said, the things I did . . . how was I ever going to face him again? I buried my face in my hands. He had apologized. Repeatedly. Given their whole deal with honor and chivalry, he was probably just being polite and kissing me because I was a shameless hussy forcing myself on him. He'd immediately said it was a mistake and couldn't ever happen again.

I was the world's biggest, most pathetic idiot. At the time I'd imagined he was into it, but, you know, drunken moron here. Which apparently meant no ability to judge and total failure to grasp reality.

Forcing myself out of bed, I did my best to clean my teeth and then rinsed them out a lot with water. I got out of my dress, letting my stays fall to the floor. I washed as much of me as I could and decided I'd ask for a bath that evening to sanitize myself.

Rosemary came in not much later, helping me dress and promising to order me a bath before supper. She offered to bring me breakfast or lunch, as it was pretty late, but the thought of food made me want to gag some more. I told her no thanks. I wandered downstairs and found Charles in the library. Where she was a lot more chipper than she had any right to be.

She wished me a good morning and said she had news. "I have decided on a trial run. I will be hosting a small, informal dinner here this evening for some family members so that you can try out your newly acquired skills."

"Why are you shouting?" I whispered. I wished I had sunglasses, as the one day I had an enormous hangover also happened to be the one day it wasn't raining. Nature was so stupid. I'd never realized how bright the stupid sun was before.

Charles smiled at me but lowered her voice. "I want you to wear the lilac, and I shall have Danvers bring you some of my jewelry to wear with it."

"'kay," was what I managed as I sat down at my desk. I didn't want to look for spell books or pretend to write letters or visit anyone or sew or do any of the stupid things we normally did. I hoped my head would shrink by

about ten sizes before the stupid dinner party. I realized how nice and cool the desk was, and I couldn't help but lay my forehead against the surface and close my eyes.

Currently, my desk was the only nonstupid thing in my life.

"Sit up, please."

"In the future, we can put our heads on desks if we want to."

She immediately hushed me. Anytime I tried to mention my time or all the cool stuff that we had, Charles wouldn't let me speak. At first, I had thought it was because she was afraid someone might overhear, but she explained that no one should know too much about the future, as they could alter it by knowing.

Which made sense. But now that I had someone to confide in, I hated that I couldn't share that part of myself.

I did as she asked and opened my eyes when I heard the patter of rain against the windows. It was like missiles being dropped, but at least it was darker. I almost yelped when I realized Charles was staring at me. "There is something different about you."

"What?" I asked defensively, suddenly out of breath. "There is absolutely nothing different about me. I'm exactly the same. Exactly."

She hummed, as if she didn't believe me. "Did something happen with Hartley last night? Has he compromised you?"

Women's intuition or voodoo powers? I was afraid to ask. "What do you mean, did he compromise me?" I wasn't an international spy with secrets for him to steal.

She opened her mouth to explain, but a crack of thunder shook the entire house, and I couldn't help it. I screamed.

Charles reached out for me, grabbing my hand. Her eyes were wide. "Are you all right?"

Breathing in and out slowly, I ordered myself to calm down and only shook a little when the next booming sound hit. "I'll be okay. I'm sort of terrified of thunderstorms."

"Is there a particular reason?"

"My parents died during a really bad thunderstorm. It's some psychological thing." Did they have psychology yet? Maybe I could invent that, too.

She waved one hand, and the storm seemed to go silent, as if moving away from us. I was about to ask if she had done that and to clarify what

“compromising” meant when Hartley came in the room. He greeted both of us, and I found that I couldn’t look him in the eye.

Charles folded up her letter. “I need to have this posted. Excuse me.”

I fought the urge to get up and follow her, because that had so obviously been deliberate. She was supposed to be my chaperone, guarding my virtue and outfitting me with my own chastity belt, but instead it was like she left me alone with Hartley every chance she got.

I wished for Hartley to stop standing there, to go to his desk and work. He didn’t. He waited there patiently until I finally raised my gaze to his.

He cleared his throat. “There is something I would like to say.”

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

THINGS I'M GOING TO INVENT IF I GET STUCK IN 1816

A sanctuary for peacocks

"Just please don't apologize again." I wasn't sure my fragile ego could take it.

"I was simply going to say that we found something women don't do as well as men."

Hackles raised. Was he trying to say I wasn't a good kisser? "Tell me you're not about to say something really sexist and dumb."

He gave me a look of mock confusion. "I'm not sure what you're referring to. I only meant that it seems women don't hold their liquor as well as men."

It was like . . . he was trying to tell me a joke. To make me laugh. To ease the tension that was so thick it would have taken a chain saw to cut through it.

It didn't work.

"Ha ha. You're hilarious," I muttered. "Can't we just pretend that it never happened?"

"We can't. It did happen. If there's one thing I cannot abide, it is a lie." His tone had shifted from playful to condemning.

Which made all my McGuilty Regretty O'Shame come flooding back. "Aren't you lying to James? About me?"

His posture straightened, as it usually did if I questioned him in some way. "I'm not lying to him. If he asks, I will make my intentions perfectly clear. As head of this family, he does have some obligation to listen to me and accept my counsel."

Hartley could dress his master plan up however he wanted, but it was still a lie with lipstick on it.

"It is worth pointing out that our inhibitions had been lowered, and neither one of us were behaving like ourselves. Had we been in full

possession of our faculties, we wouldn’t have done something so out of character . . .”

I balled up my hands, cutting him off. “I freaking get it!” I had embarrassed him with my skanky ways. To my credit, I refrained from pointing out that his character was more likely to take lollipops from orphans and kick unicorns.

Instead of the yelling making me feel better, it just made a shot of pain reverberate inside my head. I suppressed my moan. “I am never drinking again.”

“That is probably a wise decision.”

I glared at him. I didn’t need his smug condescension.

And still he stood. Like some hovering bird of prey.

Then he said, “Do you play chess?”

“No. I don’t play chess.” It was an unusual question for him. My curt response seemed to upset him, and I felt bad. “But if you have checkers, I will destroy you.”

A shadow of a smile played at the edges of his lips. His very beautiful, sexy lips that kissed like I was the star of my own personal romantic movie. I forced my eyes up.

“You’re speaking of draughts. I believe I do have it here.” He walked over to a cabinet, and I watched him, every move elegant and powerful all at the same time. “I had Stephens move the games down from the nursery so that I could play with Jemima when she is older.”

He was so good with kids. Such a great uncle. It was really sad that he didn’t plan on having any of his own. Hartley walked over to a small table near one of the shelves and cleared it off. He gestured for me to come over, and, dragging my feet, I went.

It was better than fake letter writing.

We set up the board. It was made of an expensive-looking wood, and instead of red and black, the board and the pieces were black and off-white. Red was my lucky color when I played, so I made do with the white ones. These were definitely not made of plastic. Some kind of heavy stone. Marble?

“You’re going to destroy me, then?”

“Yep. I totally am.”

He placed his last black piece in place. “And how do you propose to accomplish such a feat?”

“As long as I get to go first, I will always win.” I couldn’t explain that my senior year in college I’d worked as a teacher’s assistant, and during my office hours I would play online checkers because nobody ever came in. It got to the point that I would beat the computer every single time. “And seeing as you’re such a gentleman, I know you’ll let me go first.”

“I am always your humble servant, but the rules clearly dictate that black begins the game.”

I grabbed the board and spun it around so that now I was black and he was white. It made him laugh softly. “By all means, Miss Blythe. Make your first move.”

Even though I felt regret about last night, somehow this made it better. Sitting with him like this, talking to him about inane, innocuous things, about our childhoods and our families and things we liked—obviously I had to be guarded in how I said stuff and tried to find period-appropriate equivalents, but it felt like just before the kiss. When we had been sitting together, sharing secrets, confiding in each other.

I liked him. Obviously I was attracted to him because, hello, fallen angel’s face, but this was something more. Even though he repeatedly aggravated me, I genuinely liked him as a person. It was fun talking to him when he was like this—attentive, playful, charming, kind. That he was skipping work to play checkers was not lost on me.

Hartley got to find out that I hadn’t been kidding. The first time he was amused that I won. The second, perplexed. By the third he was getting a tad annoyed.

We started the fourth game. “You can’t beat me. You should just give up,” I said as I indicated he should king me.

“A Portwood never admits defeat,” he murmured, surrendering one of my captured pieces while studying the board. His blue eyes flicked up and startled me. “Would you care to make a wager?”

Just how sad would it be if I said yes, and that if I won, he’d have to kiss me while we were both sober?

While I debated how bad that humiliation would be, I nodded. “I’ll take that bet. And I’ll think about what I get when I win.”

“And I shall think on what boon you will grant me when I defeat you.”

When I trounced him again, fortunately the blow to his male pride had turned back into amusement. “Very well. Name your terms. Hair combs? A new gown? Jewels?”

My mouth opened. He must have known some seriously mercenary women. I meant to say something, letting him know I wasn't like the others. Like Libby. I couldn't. Because I knew my terms wouldn't be along the lines he'd just mentioned.

After being gone for almost the entire afternoon, Charles wandered back in. Like she hadn't been conspicuously absent for hours and hours. "Emma, my dear, we should get dressed for the party."

She was right. It would take eons for a bath to be prepared, not to mention how long it took to do my hair and put on my many layers of clothes.

"Thanks for the game," I said, getting up. It shocked me when Hartley's hand darted out, lightly encircling my wrist. Sparkling tingles shot up and down my arm. His piercing blue eyes mesmerized me, making my pulse frantic.

"I am afraid my pride insists on a rematch. Later this evening, perhaps?"

My mouth had gone totally dry, and for a second I could only nod. When I regained the power of speech, I said, "You already owe me. Are you sure you want to go even further into debt?"

"I would not mind being indebted to you, Miss Blythe." His words were so soft and delicious. Like he was implying something else.

Or that could have been my delusional imagination.

Charles made a fake coughing sound, and I tugged my arm away. I could feel the echo of his fingers still pressed on my skin.

What was wrong with me? Maybe all the alcohol still wasn't out of my system. I didn't know how else to explain my crushing on somebody who was not interested.

Maybe I'd ask Charles if there was some spell she could do to make me act like less of an idiot around him.

* * *

We all stood in the foyer, waiting for the guests. I heard the nickering of horses outside, and my stomach started doing flips. This was it. We were going to see if all of Charles's hard work had paid off. If I could be around other people and behave.

It felt like taking a final exam. I was all wound up, heart racing, nervous and excited all at the same time.

Or that could have been because Hartley was standing so close to me that the sleeve of his jacket kept brushing the little patch of exposed skin right above my gloves, making me shiver.

I could see my reflection in one of the hallway mirrors. The lilac dress had been a good choice. It had short, puffy sleeves and enough cleavage to be daring but still respectable. The color went well with my hair, which was shiny and bright from having just been cleaned. Some of Charles's diamonds glittered at my throat and ears. We'd even done a little 1816 makeup. I couldn't believe how much clearer my skin had gotten in my time here. In this soft light, it even looked like it glowed a little. Hartley's reflection shifted into the mirror next to me, and I tried really hard not to think about what a good couple we made. Where my dress was pastel, his outfit was dark. How my black hair contrasted to his blond. I thought we looked like we belonged together.

I had only a moment to enjoy my election as mayor of Crazy Town, as the front door opened, and the guests were being helped with their coats and umbrellas by Hartley's servants. Charles and I had very different definitions of what constituted a small party. There was a literal horde.

"Are you ready?" Hartley murmured next to my ear, sending a flash of heat down the side of my neck.

"I think I'm going to puke again."

"Do anything but that, and all will be well."

Another joke. It didn't settle my stomach.

"And in case I didn't mention it earlier, you look lovely tonight."

Compliments? From Hartley? Now I had an entire roiling sea inside me as all of my skin flushed. Vomiting turned into a more distinct possibility. Then the introductions started, and I had to put on my game face. Charles had run through the invited list beforehand, telling me who was who. I knew exactly what to say, who to curtsy to, who to nod to, who to offer my hand to. Charles was Emma-ing me all over the place, letting everyone know about our close relationship.

My gaze shifted toward the locked library doors. Hartley had this thing about his private space, which I totally got, but little did he know that before he came downstairs I had stuck Sir Reginald in there. Tomorrow morning, I would get Mrs. Farnsworth to open the door for me to let the

poor cat out, allowing me to find the right key and get access whenever I wanted. My only hope was that the psycho feline would stay quiet until morning and not wreak too much havoc.

I had to do something, considering how much time I'd been wasting daydreaming about Hartley. I should have been more dedicated to finding my way home.

The introductions were over, and everyone had moved into the drawing room. From the grins on Charles's and Hartley's faces, I knew I had passed. Letting out a sigh of relief, I became Charles's shadow as she moved from group to group, talking about how dear I was to her and that I had become like her daughter. Everyone looked me over with an appraising eye. Especially the mothers with eligible sons.

Thankfully, Stephens announced dinner was ready, and I went in last with a distant cousin of Hartley's who had no claim to a title. He offered me his arm, and it was nothing like when Hartley did it. No chills, no tingles, no goose bumps of any kind. I probably should have remembered this guy's name, but he was good at making conversation, and I had to do very little to keep him going. It was easier to be quiet.

Dinner itself was no different. I carried on a conversation with the young woman seated to my left. Hartley was on my right, but he was deep in conversation with Charles, on his other side. They had seated me next to him deliberately. To show everyone at the table that I was important.

Miss Mary Littlefield was blonde, pretty, and cavity-inducing sweet. My initial inclination was to believe it was all an act, but she was sincere. She was being courted by a Lord White and was very excited about her prospects. It was easy to relax and chat with her.

The footmen brought out some bread, but I declined when it was offered to me.

"Do you not care for rolls, Miss Blythe? Lord Hartley's cook is especially well known for them." Her face was screwed up in honest concern.

Without thinking, I answered, "Do you have any idea how many carbohydrates are in those?"

"Car—what? Is there some sort of hydration issue?" she asked.

I caught Hartley's expression. He crooked a single eyebrow to let me know that I wasn't making sense. If we'd been alone, I probably would

have tried to explain myself. But in this situation, I would only make things worse. I changed the subject.

“That is a beautiful necklace, Miss Littlefield.”

She thanked me and forgot all about my I-don’t-eat-carbs snafu as she explained that the large blue sapphire was a family heirloom. I tried to pay attention to the history of the necklace, but I kept sneaking peeks at Hartley. Just one eyebrow, and I knew what he had been thinking, and he’d kept me out of a potentially sticky situation. Like we had our own little unspoken language. I didn’t know why that gave me such a thrill, but it did. It was a bond between us. A secret we shared.

Like I was on my way to becoming fluent in Hartley.

More courses were presented, but everything was like sawdust in my mouth. I was way too nervous to enjoy food. The conversation shifted, and it was my turn to talk to Hartley. “You’re doing very well,” he said, encouragingly.

“Thank you.”

There was this moment, this look, that made me forget we were in a room filled with people. Like I wasn’t imagining things and maybe Hartley had some interest in me, too.

I thought that maybe there might be something more there. Right up until he said, “I am so pleased that this is working. James is going to adore you.”

Mood killer at its finest. Like he’d picked up a gun, held it right against my heart, and pulled the trigger. I kept my smile plastered on my face, closing my eyes so that the surprising hot tears behind my eyelids would not fall. That would be a huge scandal.

Tommy brought out part of the meat course. He had a peacock. Like a peacock that still looked alive. Only cooked. He placed it in front of Hartley. “That is so cool,” I breathed. And super disturbing.

“I assure you, miss, it is quite hot,” Tommy responded, looking confused.

The poor bird was being carved up, and I actually felt sad for it. I had never liked peacocks, given that I’d been attacked by one when I was eight years old and my foster parents had taken me to the zoo. Maybe this should have felt like payback, but I had no intention of eating one when his head and tail feathers had apparently been sewn back on to his cooked

flesh. That was fifty shades of disgusting. I couldn't eat him when I could see his face.

The party carried on, everyone having a good time. I seemed to be the only one who cut the fat off my meat. Like I was the sole person being careful with my food. Everybody else just seemed to be relishing their meals. It seemed a better way to live than to be constantly stressing about calories and whether or not something had a high nutritional content or if it was bad for me. It gave me something to think about.

I didn't know how much time had passed, I was enjoying myself so much. Charles stood and announced that the women would now go through.

"You don't want to stay, Miss Blythe?" Hartley teased. I wanted to give him a look to let him know what I thought about his quip but wouldn't risk ruining the whole evening by giving people something to gossip about.

"Have you tried the sweetmeats?" Miss Littlefield asked when we sat on two wingback chairs near each other.

Sweet meat? And I thought the peacock was weird.

I must have looked bewildered. "The marzipan?" She nodded at a tray. Marzipan was like unnaturally shaped candy.

For some reason, that gave me a little mini–panic attack. I didn't know what everything was. I couldn't be ready for every strange word, every weird ritual, every odd phrase I was expected to understand.

Two older women came and sat with us. I tried to recall their names. Mrs. Blue-something. And Lady . . . I wanted to say it started with a *g*. I never knew how bad I was with names until I came here, where nobility had a whole bunch of them. Mrs. Blue spoke first. "And where are you from, Miss Blythe?"

Lady G jumped in. "How do you know Lord Hartley?"

"How long will you be staying here in London?"

"It seems as if you and Mrs. Meriweather are very close."

"Who is your father?"

My brain started tuning them out, turning their voices into white noise. It was just question after question after question. They didn't even stop to let me answer. They were grilling me. Letting me know that despite Charles's protection, they still felt as if they could be intrusive. I knew they weren't supposed to be asking me personal questions like that. In 2017 it wouldn't be a big deal, but here it was insulting.

Adrenaline skittered up my nervous system, choking my throat. I had to get out. “If you will excuse me, please.”

I tried to walk calmly upstairs and not draw attention to myself. I heard the men laugh. I wished I could be in the dining room. With Hartley.

Which made the panicky feeling worse.

When I got upstairs, lighting flashed and thunder boomed. I had planned on going to my room, but this spot here on the floor was just fine. It would do until the storm had passed.

Maybe I could just stay up here the rest of the night. With that many people, they wouldn’t miss me, right?

I wrapped my gloved arms around my legs, screwing my eyelids shut. Sometimes these storms could last forever, but as always, I hoped it would move on quickly. I laid my head on top of my knees. It would be over soon. It had to be.

Finally, as the sounds started to dissipate, I heard thundering of a different type.

“What the dev—what are you doing?”

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

THINGS I'M GOING TO INVENT IF I GET STUCK IN 1816

Card games that do not involve questionable words

Hartley. The grouchy tone was back.

"Why so charming this evening?" I asked.

"Excellent breeding. Why are you on the floor?"

"Bad breeding? And because I don't like thunderstorms."

He looked around him, as if unsure of what to do. "I have come to retrieve you. You've been missed."

I scoffed. "I bet. Those women down there are insane. It was like an interrogation in a third world country. Relentless, ignoring the Geneva Conventions, and I'm pretty sure a full body cavity search was on the agenda."

The arched eyebrow was back.

"They're insulting me. I needed a break. They were done with the peacock sacrifice and were moving on to the virgin one." I had meant to say the last part just in my head, trying to remember my manners. But it caused Hartley to have one of those toe-curling smiles.

Hartley shifted his weight from one leg to the other, trying to stay serious "Come. You can't hide up here like a petulant child."

"I am not a petulant child." I ignored his outstretched hand, standing up on my own. "And you don't need to talk to me like that. That accent is a lot less cute when you're acting that way."

"Allow me to escort you back downstairs."

"I'll come down when I'm good and ready. I don't need your help finding my way around." I decided to head into my room. It was like my own personal fortress. Hartley wouldn't dare follow me there. I yanked the door open, and glaring at him over my shoulder, I closed it behind me.

I stood in total darkness.

This was not my room.

"Are you aware . . ." His voice trailed off.

“Yes. I realize I’m in the linen closet.” I knew he couldn’t see me, but I crossed my arms anyway.

Several beats passed before he asked, “What are you doing?”

I sighed. I felt my face go bright red. “Waiting for you to leave so I won’t be embarrassed.”

“And compounding your mistake by remaining in the closet is not embarrassing?” I could hear the mirth in his tone. So humiliatingly mirthful.

Resolving not to let him get to me, I came out with head held high and took his waiting arm, ignoring the electric sparks that flared to life against my skin. But he didn’t walk. Instead he did his best impersonation of a statue. “Something else is vexing you. Besides the storm.”

And besides him? There was one thing, but it was dumb. In fact, I had purposely shoved it down inside a box in my subconscious because I hadn’t wanted to consider it.

“Charles said there could possibly be dancing. And I don’t think I’m ready yet.” Even though I was not so bad at dancing, there was a lot to retain. I could tell that I was a daily pain in Mr. Watson’s rear end. In my defense, their dancing was dumb and hard to remember.

Hartley released my arm, turning so that he faced me. “I can help you.”

The absolute last thing in the world that I needed was for him to hold me. But before I could back up, his hand was at my waist.

I forgot my anger, I forgot the storm, I forgot that I didn’t dance so great. Every part of me was focused on the sensation of Hartley’s hand on the small of my back. Like, even though he was wearing gloves and I had on more layers than an onion, I could feel the heat from his fingers. As if I were wearing a backless dress.

Those same fingers flexed against my skin. Once, then twice. “You’re not wearing a corset.”

“How can you tell? And aren’t you not allowed to say stuff like that to me? You can’t talk about my underwear.”

He pressed his lips together in a tight line. Uh-oh.

Surprisingly enough, he left his hand where it was.

I didn’t mind.

I tried to plead my case. “I wanted one night of freedom. One night to breathe and enjoy myself without it. You have no idea how terrible those

things are. I seriously think I'm damaging my internal organs. Do you know what I mean?"

"Seldom, if ever." Apparently done with his bad-cop routine, he rubbed the bridge of his nose with his free hand and sighed. "If there is dancing, you cannot participate. Any man who touches you will immediately realize that you are not wearing a corset—"

I couldn't help but butt in. "And everybody will be scandalized, and my reputation will be forever ruined, and James won't want me, and the whole world will explode, blah, blah, blah. No worries, that's been covered extensively by Professor Charles. I don't need advice from the peanut gallery."

He took my light insult in stride. "I'm glad we could come to an understanding."

"Yeah. And you can let go of me now."

He dropped his hand immediately, like I'd scalded him. Like he hadn't realized that he'd been holding me that whole time. I wanted it to mean more than it probably did.

I let him take me back downstairs. On our way there, I realized that arguing with him had made me forget about the storm.

Along with him holding me for a lot longer than he should have, that made two marks in the pro column. He had been responsible for both.

And if those women were downstairs still waiting to eviscerate me, I would handle it. I wasn't going to let two know-nothings who'd died hundreds of years ago make me feel uncomfortable or confuse me. Or make me question myself.

Because Hartley had already cornered that particular market.

* * *

Emma had accused him of speaking down to her. Of becoming angry. She had not been wrong. She had the ability to utterly vex him, taking away the patience he prided himself on having.

When they returned to their guests, someone was playing at the piano, and there were several card games going on. Emma didn't seem to understand any of them, but she watched the whist game with particular interest. Every time someone won two out of three games and proclaimed, "I won a rubber!" she would dissolve into giggles. Her whole face lit up.

She was enchanting. He found her laughter infectious, wanting to laugh himself even though he had no idea what she found so funny about that particular phrase.

Despite his resolve to keep her at a distance, somehow she had managed to burrow under his skin. She made him think of her even when he wished not to. She had quickly become his last thought in the evening and his first when he awoke.

He'd built a sturdy wall around his heart, but she was stealing one brick at a time. He wanted to remain locked away. Emma Blythe simply wouldn't permit it.

As he preferred to keep to himself and not spend much time in society, he was generally left alone by the others. Which suited him because it allowed him to watch her. To see the graceful line of her neck, the way her hair seemed to pick up the light and reflect it. How pleasing he found her form, even without a corset.

He saw the moment when she decided to let go of her fear and anxiety over making a mistake and to enjoy herself. It was difficult not to laugh when William approached her with a tray of champagne flutes and she very quickly sent him on his way.

People were kind to her. Some seemed to be responding to her enthusiasm. She seemed excited by everything she saw and everything she experienced. While many of their conversations had been marked by conflict, not all had. He had enjoyed quiet times with her and had seen that appreciation and enthusiasm directed toward himself. He wasn't sure why he was so keen to chase it away. She was refreshing.

Like now. She behaved as if she'd never sat in a drawing room playing piquet before. She laughed when she lost, not looking the least bit concerned as her pile of pennies faded away.

Hartley supposed she wouldn't have to concern herself with it, as it had been his money she played with.

Lord and Lady Grossmont came to make their farewells. There seemed to be some sort of issue with locating their coats. The rain had not relented, and they could not leave without them. He sensed Emma behind him, to the left. It did not bear thinking about how he knew it was her. For his own self-preservation, he chose not speak to her.

A footman approached and smiled at Emma. Hartley was struck with the desire to do the man physical harm. He'd always prided himself on having

the best servants and most efficient household, and this was disconcerting. “Find their coats, now,” he snapped.

“Why do you talk to people like that?” He loved the musical quality to her voice. Like some ancient Siren, able to lure him onto the rocks of destruction.

“I’m the Earl of Hartley.” Upstairs, holding her in his arms had done something to his psyche. Combined with the kiss from the night previous, just being this close made him think things he oughtn’t. The tension had still not left his body.

“So?”

“So? So?” he sputtered. Was it possible that she still didn’t grasp what that truly meant?

“Calm down, Daffy Duck. Look, I get your whole macho lord-of-the-manor thing you’ve got going on. I may even be a little partial to it. But Ezekiel is new. He’s doing the best he can. I wish you could hear yourself.”

Had she honestly just called him a daft waterfowl? What sort of insult was that? “Why does it concern you how I speak to anyone?”

It was then that he chose to finally make eye contact and was upset by the level of disappointment he saw in her eyes. He had been doing it again. Leaping to anger. Taking offense when he should not, giving it when he should not.

Giving her opinion far more weight than he should have.

Then her words made his chest feel hollow. “Because I know you’re a better man than this.”

Emma drifted away, as if she could no longer stomach to be near him. Clearing his throat, he thanked the new William when he returned with the correct outerwear. He bid the Grossmonts good night and retreated into his billiards room. He wanted to regroup before he joined the others.

No one had ever dared question him before. From a young age he knew he would be the next earl. Accepted what that meant. The responsibility. The centuries of ancestors who had fought and bled and planned to make this moment possible. How very seriously he had always taken his title. His duty.

And himself.

He rolled a billiard ball across the table, running it into the others. He selected a cue from the wall but found he had no desire to play.

Emma did not take his title or his responsibilities seriously. She didn't even seem all that interested in his desire to ensure the earldom had an heir through his brother. It was to be her marriage, and it seemed like the last thing she cared about.

"Now it's my turn to fetch you. Charles is wondering where you are. People are leaving."

For a moment, he thought she might be some sort of mirage, conjured up by the wanting in his mind. Her dress whispered as she moved, and she had a small smile, as if she knew some private joke. He couldn't see her eye color in this light, but he imagined it now, a green like the summer grass surrounding Rosewood. "And I need to apologize to you."

"That's a rather refreshing change of pace," he said in a gruff tone.

Emma ran one gloved hand along the side of his billiard table, and for one insane moment he found himself envious of an inanimate object. "I shouldn't judge you. You're a product of your environment." Just as he had earlier, she rolled one billiard ball toward another. "So why are you hiding out in here?"

"Perhaps I'm upset about not being able to dance, either."

"You're hilarious. You should go on tour." She turned to look at the portraits on the wall closest to her. "And you wouldn't mock me if you knew how much easier dancing was where I'm from."

"In what way?"

"Um, in every way. I can't really explain it. I'd have to show you. But I think you'd probably consider it to be inappropriate."

His curiosity was thoroughly piqued. That mischievous smile returned, and he knew she was about to say or do something she shouldn't.

And he wanted her to.

"By all means. You must show me how you dance in America." His ribs felt taut, as if bracing for a blow.

She walked over to the door and closed it, and his heart pounded when she turned the lock. Emma looked at him over her shoulder with a provocative expression no woman should ever give a man unless she was prepared to deal with the consequences of his reaction. His grip on the pool cue tightened.

Walking toward him, she removed her gloves slowly, dropping them on top of the table. "My hands are getting sweaty." Then she shook her hands and rolled her head from one side to the other.

Hartley hated that his mind went to a dark place. Did she mean for them to be discovered alone, while she disrobed? An earl was a much better catch than his heir presumptive.

Then she waited directly in front of him, and she was so near that he could have pulled her to him in half a heartbeat. Her intoxicating scent flooded his senses. “What is that perfume you wear?” he asked in a strangled voice.

“Charles took me to Floris to buy it. Have you been there? It’s such a cute shop. Anyway, he made me my own signature scent.” Her eyes went wide at those words, as if it was beyond belief for such a thing to happen to her. “It’s mainly orange blossom and vanilla. And it’s not just perfume. I have bath oils, too. It smelled so good and made my skin so smooth.” She put her arm out. “Here, feel.”

“Beg your pardon?” Surely he had misunderstood.

Emma rolled her eyes. “Feel how soft it made my skin.”

His fingers itched to obey her command, and his hand edged upward.

“It’s not going to work if you’re still wearing gloves.”

Hartley then did something he hadn’t done since he was a small boy. Putting his hand up to his mouth, he grabbed the tip of his glove just above his middle finger and impatiently yanked it off with his teeth. Without his consent, his fingertips did as she bade and ran themselves up the length of her arm. It was like pure silk, and he forgot how to breathe.

The need to feel with his lips what he’d just felt with his fingers struck, until she said, “See? I told you.”

Her words were like a cold splash of water, snapping his reverie, preventing him from behaving even more foolishly. He withdrew his hand with a shudder, hoping she did not notice. He tried to regroup, regain control of himself. He could not lay the blame on port this time. He was utterly bewitched by the feel of her, the smell of her, the sight of her.

“There’s also something called toilet water that he gave me, which turned out to be something completely different from what I was expecting.”

“I like it.” He hoped she couldn’t hear the hoarseness in his voice.

“Me too. I’ve decided I smell like a Creamsicle.”

“A what?”

She glanced up, as if trying to settle on a translation. “Oh. Like ice cream. Or a cold dessert.”

“I know what ice cream is. We have ice cream.”

Her lips parted, and she whispered, “Shut *up*. You have ice cream? Here? And you haven’t shared? That’s like, neglect. Or a crime against humanity.”

Why would she command him to be quiet and then ask questions? “We would have to go to Gunter’s for it. We can go, if you’d like.” He found himself eager to please her; the blinding smile that colored all her features was his reward, and he took her squeal of delight as acquiescence. He was very close to crossing over that line again. “You were going to show me how you dance?”

“Right. So we have different kinds of dancing for different kinds of music. Like you guys do. For fast music, it’s kind of like this.”

Then Emma began a series of movements, like some sort of full-body convulsion, jerking and shaking. For a moment he worried she was suffering from an apoplectic fit. Part of him was tempted to laugh. Until he saw her rapturous expression. And her movements changed from ridiculous and silly to seductive and enticing. He found himself wanting to join in with her monkey dancing. He had to clear his painfully constricted throat. “And if the tempo is slower?”

She came to a halt, still grinning but out of breath. “Then we do this.”

He had thought to provide himself with some relief, only to find that he had worsened his circumstances. She came even closer, nearly touching him, but not.

Until she did.

His gut clenched painfully when she reached for his wrists and placed his hands on the sides of her waist. “Your hands go here, and mine go there.” She reached up and put her hands around the back of his neck, reminding him of last night when his blood had been set on fire. A pounding sensation spread through his entire body. “And then what?” His voice was husky, even to his own ears.

“Then we sway in a circle like this.”

Whatever slight distance had existed a moment ago evaporated as she pressed herself against him, again echoing the previous night. Her smile when she raised her face to his was genuine. He didn’t know how he could have imagined her capable of trickery or beguilement. He saw only honesty.

And a beauty that he spent too much time trying to deny but in this moment could not.

They moved from one foot to the other, back and forth, while slightly turning. When the lump in his throat cleared, he asked, “This is how American women dance with their husbands? In the privacy of their own homes?”

“This is how everyone dances with everyone. In public. Girls dance this way with boys they just met.” He felt her sweet but unbelievable words against his jaw since they were cheek to cheek, and it tightened in response.

Even if she was not bothered by their proximity, he could not stay in this stance without making a grave mistake. It felt different dancing, or whatever Emma claimed this was, with a corsetless woman. His fingers curved reflexively against her, wanting to draw her even closer.

Americans certainly did do things differently from the British.

Before he could do something else he would inevitably regret later, there was a whine and the sound of claws against the billiards room door. Most likely Aunt Charles’s corgi. It was enough to make him remember himself.

He removed his hands and stepped back, encountering no resistance from her. He bowed deeply. “I thank you for the dance, Miss Blythe.”

She curtsied to him as if he were the king himself.

“Perhaps we should rejoin the others before Aunt Charles sends anyone else?” he suggested, his demeanor much more at ease than his pulse.

“Definitely,” she nodded. “I’ll go out first.” She picked up her gloves, tugging them back into place, giving Hartley the idea to do the same. His had fallen to the floor. She opened the door, sticking her head out. Princess trotted inside and went under the billiards table. “The coast is clear,” Emma said, just before she sneaked back into the main hallway.

He stayed behind, taking a moment to collect his thoughts and calm his reaction to Emma.

Emma.

To her face and among others, he always called her Miss Blythe. But at some point in his private thoughts she had become Emma.

That realization thoroughly alarmed him.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

THINGS I'M GOING TO INVENT IF I GET STUCK IN 1816

Milk chocolate, particularly for ice cream

When I woke up the next morning, all I could think about was Hartley. The get-together after dinner had actually been fun. A lot more fun than I was expecting. Turned out piquet looked easy, but it was hard. Like, lose all my money hard.

Not my money. Some money Hartley had lent me. Which he wasn't getting back, as I had no way to earn income here. That he was already super-rich helped ease some of my guilt.

What I thought about most was how he had acted. I watched him play a few hands of something, possibly poker, with a bunch of other men. He had that sardonic, twisted smile on and had most of the other players laughing. I loved that he was witty and elegant without resorting to jokes about bodily functions. It was such a nice change after boys who thought the height of cultural sophistication were YouTube videos of men injuring themselves.

And he was a much better card player than I was. I figured it was due to him being so smart. One of his cousins lost every hand and a fortune during their game. His wife had been distraught (and distraught for these women was like biting the corner of their lips. They were very into not showing emotions for some reason), and I watched Hartley deliberately drop an ace to the floor so that the cousin could win the game and earn back the money he'd lost without any damage to his pride.

There really was this streak of kindness and generosity in him that sometimes seemed at odds with how he presented himself. He loved his family. The arranged marriage thing he was trying to force on me and his brother seemed a little uncaring, but that was my own morality and expectations trying to incompatibly mesh with the mores and customs of a much different time.

Speaking of different times, I had kind of taken advantage of him last night. I had found that I liked touching him and being close to him. There was an undeniable physical attraction there. At least, there was on my end. Showing him modern dancing had had an ulterior motive, one that I exploited. I tried to feel bad about it but couldn't.

Although I knew about his plans, I wasn't going to stick around. Which meant I probably shouldn't be trying to snuggle up to him or smooch on him. But I wanted to think of being with him like a fun holiday romance where you met someone and spent all your time with them knowing that it would come to an end. Couldn't I have something like that?

You could, except he still wants you to marry his brother, an internal voice whispered. Oh yeah. There was that.

First thing in the morning after I was dressed, I found out that Hartley was gone and Charles was still sleeping. I asked Rosemary to summon Mrs. Farnsworth. It felt a little like sending a squire to go wake up a dragon. So far I'd managed to not have much interaction with the housekeeper, although occasionally I would see her in the halls, where she would give me the evil eye. I remembered from her letters how she seemed to have a small crush on Hartley. Which I couldn't blame her for, but she seemed to perceive me as some kind of threat and was never happy to see me.

Like now. It took a long time for her to show up. When she finally did, she looked just like she had the first day I'd met her. Frosty blonde hair pulled back into a perfect, tight bun. Black dress with a massive keychain filled with keys hanging from her waist. "May I help you, Miss Blythe?"

Her words were polite, but there was always this tone. Like she resented having to do anything for me. I explained that Sir Reginald had somehow gotten locked in the library. On cue, the cat let out a pitiful cry.

The housekeeper hesitated for a moment before reaching for her keys. It was then that I noticed how different the keys were to the ones I was used to. These were heavy, thick. I had hoped to steal the library key, which was kind of like hoping to steal some cheese from a rabid ferret. Unfortunately, she never removed the key from the ring, and they all looked the same to me. There was no way I'd be able to grab the right one and get it off the ring, all without her noticing.

Then I thought I could break the key off in the lock, rendering it useless for a while, but it wasn't flimsy. I would have to do something to the lock

itself. Break it somehow. She opened the door, and Sir Reginald was waiting expectantly on the other side. I swear he gave me a dirty look before he slunk out of the room.

Mrs. Farnsworth closed the door quickly and relocked it. The key clinked against the others when she took it from the lock and returned it to her belt. I saw my chance slip past.

“Is there anything else I can do for you, miss?”

Again polite with a rude tone. “Is there something you want to say to me?”

“I’m not sure I take your meaning.”

Right. “I think you take my meaning just fine. You obviously don’t like me.”

She held her hands in front of her, folded against her skirt. She glared at me, as if trying to decide whether or not she should speak. I wasn’t her boss, but I was her boss’s guest. “I think you have a secret.”

Fevered panic roared to life inside me, sending waves of ice into my stomach. “I don’t have a secret.” I could hear the desperation in my voice even though I’d tried to hide it.

She gave me a little half smile. “You skulk around His Lordship’s home, looking for something. He and Mrs. Meriweather may be blind to your behavior, but I am not. I will discover what you are doing.”

“You’re dismissed,” I said through clenched teeth. I didn’t really have the right to tell her what to do, and I felt rude and condescending. But I wanted this conversation to end.

Mrs. Farnsworth knew she’d gotten under my skin. With that mocking smile still in place, she curtsied and left. Here I’d thought I was being sly and careful. But if a woman I hardly ever saw knew what I was up to, it wouldn’t be long until Hartley himself figured it out.

I couldn’t let that happen.

* * *

Hartley returned a couple of hours later. By then I’d had lunch, and I wanted to go out. The sun had been shining the entire morning and was still shining. It was a complete miracle.

I let myself into the library without saying anything and started throwing open shades.

“Shouldn’t you knock?” he asked.

“Shouldn’t you stand up when I come in a room?” I glanced over at him, but he was still looking down at his books, writing with one of those infernal quills. Once I’d filled the room with light, I walked over to his desk. “It’s finally a nice day, and I really want to go out. And I can’t go out unless you or Charles come with me. Maybe we could go to that ice cream place you mentioned.”

He sighed and lay down his quill. “Miss Blythe, I am very—”

“Busy,” I finished. “I get it. Always busy. You know what they say about all work and no play.”

“Yes, it makes Jack a very wealthy boy.”

It also made him a stick-in-the-mud, but I wasn’t going to ruin whatever chance I had at getting him to agree. “You’re already wealthy and I’m bored and I love the sun and I have to have an escort, so can we go? Please?”

“Where is Aunt Charles?”

“Still in bed.” Not wanting him to have an excuse to put me off, I added, “Last night she said she wanted to make some calls this afternoon and wanted to go alone.” Part of me suspected that she planned on issuing some mafialike threats to those people who wouldn’t accept me.

Because last night, when I’d thought the evening had gone well, Charles had been grim. “Things did not go over as I’d hoped,” she said.

As I thought about it, there had been some people who I didn’t talk to. They pretty much avoided me the entire evening. I didn’t realize it had been meant to be offensive. “So what do we do now?”

“There is one person who could guarantee you entry into every home in London,” Charles said.

“I thought you were that person.”

“I am feared. She is beloved. There is a difference. Let me think on it.”

Realizing that Hartley still hadn’t responded, I decided to just beg. “Please, can we go for a drive? Please, please, please? Look at how nicely I’m asking!” I even batted my eyelashes at him. “I am chomping at the bit for some ice cream!”

“Champing at the bit,” he corrected absentmindedly. “You really aren’t familiar with horses, are you?”

Duh. I hadn’t been lying. Well, at least not about that. “Please?”

Another world-weary sigh, as if I made his life infinitely difficult. “It’s obvious you will not let me get any work done until I do. Very well, let’s go for a drive.”

I might have jumped up and down a couple of times, clapping my hands. Might have. I would neither confirm nor deny such immature behavior. But inside my head I was screaming *yay, yay, yay,* beyond thrilled at the prospect of some delicious, soul-soothing junk food. It had been way too long. Hartley told me to get my things, whatever that meant, and he rang for Stephens, asking him to have somebody get the gig ready.

Running upstairs, I nearly crashed face-first into Charles. “Oh! Sorry. Or, I beg your pardon.”

Me out of breath was apparently funny, judging by the smile on her face. “And where are you rushing off to in such a hurry?”

“We’re going to a place or a person called Gunter’s to get ice cream.” I didn’t know which. Hartley hadn’t clarified, and I hadn’t cared, as long I was getting a frozen dessert out of it.

“The tea shop?” A strange expression crept into Charles’s eyes. With her being an actual witch, that cunning look scared me a little. “I shall have to accompany you. This is a rather fortuitous coincidence. I’ve recently discovered that the person I wish to speak to will be there today.”

A little bit of me went flat. I loved Charles, but I had been looking forward to spending some alone time with Hartley. She said she would inform Hartley of her decision to tag along, and I found out that “things” I was supposed to gather included a totally unnecessary shawl and an even more unnecessary bonnet. And gloves and a parasol. Which in my opinion just ruined the whole “I want to be out in the sun” thing. But I let Rosemary put whatever she wanted on me as long as it meant that I got to go out.

The driving team pulled up something they called a barouche, which was like a convertible carriage. It was exactly like the one I’d seen the Queen of England in during a parade. Charles and I sat in the back, facing forward, and Hartley sat across from us.

I hadn’t been in many carriages, but it seemed like we were going really slow. It took me a minute before I realized what was going on. “We’re cruising the strip.”

“Pardon?” Charles asked.

“Back in . . . at home, when I was sixteen, we used to get in our cars, er, carriages and go cruising. Driving up and down the street to see who was there and to be seen.”

“Precisely,” she nodded. “The more people that see us together the better.”

We stopped often and spoke to people in carriages going the opposite direction, or to individual men on horses who rode up alongside us. Charles would whisper the names and titles before the conversation started.

“That is Lord—”

“Goring,” I cut in. “Lord Goring.” I had met him at our dinner party. “Him I remember because it rhymed with ‘boring.’” The only thing he wanted to talk about was filling up his stock pond and the types of fish he liked to catch. Not only that, but he spoke without any inflection in his voice at all. It was worse than you could even imagine.

“Emma!” she hissed under her breath, but I’d been careful not to say it too loud. Hartley looked way too entertained.

Sure enough, it was every bit as awful as I imagined. In a robot monotone. Something about salmon or trout. I briefly fantasized about punching him in the throat, just to see if that would make his voice change at all. Or if it would keep him from talking about fish. To distract myself, I looked at his funny pants. They went to his knees, with white stockings below. There were even little bows involved. I was very glad Hartley wore those awesome boots instead of something like this getup.

Finally we were on our way, and I let out a sigh of relief. “I feel really bad for that guy’s wife.”

“Lord Goring is unattached,” Charles told me, just before she inclined her head to a woman in another carriage.

“That superexciting guy is single? I’m shocked.”

“I’m certain he could wed if he chose to do so,” Hartley said. “But he seems the sort not likely to be married.”

“Is he gay?”

He slightly frowned, considering. “Yes, on occasion he could be considered a merry fellow.”

“No,” I leaned forward, closer to him, hoping Charles wasn’t listening in, or else there’d be a lecture. “I mean, does he prefer men to women?”

“Miss Blythe!” Hartley sounded like a scandalized schoolmarm. I half expected him to start clutching some pearls. “That is not something you should even know about, let alone speak about.”

“Sheesh. It was only a question. Although it’s not fair that he has better legs than I do.” I tugged on the end of my skirt, looking down at my feet in my impractical shoes. Hartley laid a hand on top of mine, presumably to stop me from exposing my scandalous legs to the world. I’m sure he didn’t mean to turn my nerve endings into fireworks.

He lingered for a second longer than he should have and then muttered something that sounded suspiciously like “total lack of inhibition.”

We arrived at our destination, and Hartley leaped out first to help us out. I didn’t need the help, but I wasn’t going to pass up on yet another opportunity to hold hands with him, however briefly. Even if that did make me lame.

He offered both me and Charles his arms and escorted us to a tiny little table. Even if part of me chafed under these societal rules, I sort of loved how proper and formal he was. He managed to make me feel protected. Safe. Cared for. Like I was special. The princess in my own personal fairy tale. Seriously, chivalry was fun. I liked that he opened doors, pulled out my chair, and assisted me in and out of carriages. How he was on the lookout for traffic and ruffians, as he called them. I knew somewhere back in the future there was an entire classroom of women majoring in feminist studies who would burn me in effigy if they knew what I was secretly thinking, but it was true.

I tipped my face up to the sun, closing my eyes as I soaked it in. When I opened my eyes again, I found Hartley studying me. He cleared his throat and asked what we wanted. It didn’t matter as long as it was ice cream.

There were only a few tables set up, and waiters were dashing across the street to the parked carriages lining the maple-shaded square. The carriages were full of eligible women and their chaperones. The men were on horses and on foot, flirting with them.

Personally, I was glad I didn’t have to eat while seated behind a horse’s rear end.

Hartley had listed off some flavors like lavender and bergamot (?), and then he said the magic word.

Chocolate.

“Shut up.” Both he and Charles stared at me. “Sorry, that’s a good thing. It means I’m both excited and shocked by what you just said.” Not only did they have ice cream, but they had freaking chocolate?

“Am I to take it that you want the chocolate?”

I wanted that chocolate more than I’d ever wanted anything else in my entire life. Including Hartley. “Um, yes. Yes. Yes. Yes. Yes to chocolate.”

He smiled at my enthusiastic response. He had no idea how much I was actually holding in because we were out in public. The discovery of chocolate was a climb-up-on-the-table-and-scream-for-joy kind of moment. They should be glad I was behaving. Charles said she would have the same. He left to go and get my chocolatey chocolate ice cream.

“Excellent choice,” she said, observing the crowd around us. “The chocolate here is strong, dark, and delicious. Much the same way I prefer my men.”

That made me laugh, which caused Hartley to turn around. My breath caught as I realized for the millionth time how handsome and tall he was. I had to disagree with Charles, though. I didn’t want my men dark. I wanted them fair.

Forcing my gaze away so as to not make a scene, I watched as the waiters carried ice cream in all different colors and fruit shapes to various people. There was even one shaped like a steak. Don’t get me wrong, because I love ice cream, but there was something inherently wrong with a meatsicle.

A waiter approached while I kept sneaking glances at Hartley. When he discovered that our ice cream was already taken care of, he asked if there was anything we’d like to drink. I was so distracted I said, “I’ll just have a Sprite.”

I immediately realized my mistake when the waiter said, “A sprite? Like a pixie?”

Presumably there were no carbonated sodas yet. I gave him a tight smile and said, “I’ll just have what she’s having,” nodding my head at Charles, who placed our order.

“There is our prey, right on time,” Charles murmured. I followed her gaze to see a fashionably dressed husband and wife and their daughter being seated at one of the tables. Everyone was trying to catch the woman’s gaze, but all her attention was focused on her little girl, who I guessed to be about nine or ten years old.

“Our prey?” We weren’t going to do something weird to them, were we? Would magic be involved? I didn’t ask. I never asked Charles about how magic worked or what she could do. To be honest, I didn’t want to know. Yes, it was cool that it existed, but I figured the less I knew about it the better I could sleep at night. Because for every Harry Potter, there was a Lord Voldemort. I did not need to spend my nights worried about the potential evil warlock invasion. My imagination was already wild enough, thanks.

“That is the Duchess of Warfield. She is the key to your success. Now all you have to do is go over and charm her.”

Charm her? Had Charles met me?

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

THINGS I'M GOING TO INVENT IF I GET STUCK IN 1816

First aid classes (I wonder if Hartley will let me demonstrate CPR on him?)

"Please talk some sense into your aunt," I said to Hartley when he returned with our ice cream. I dug in but was disappointed. This was definitely not Ben & Jerry's. It was still ice cream, and still better than no chocolate, but their chocolate was weird. Like it needed milk and sugar. Maybe I could invent that, too.

"What scheme has she hatched now?" he asked as he sat down.

"The Duke and Duchess of Warfield go to Gunter's every afternoon the sun is shining," Charles said. "Danvers discovered that for me this morning. Apparently, their daughter loves ice cream."

Well, of course she did. Because ice cream was the best thing ever.

Even though the taste was off, it occurred to me that it might be due to it being pure food. I'd noticed that my skin was healthier, clearer. That I'd lost weight. There were no preservatives or additives in my food, no pesticides. It was probably the first time in my life I'd eaten real, actual food on a regular basis.

"So what's her story?" I asked Charles. I needed some background detail if they expected me to try and befriend her.

"Lady Louisa was the only child of a wealthy earl. Her mother was known for her influence amongst the Whigs and as one of society's most popular hostesses. Her parents wished her to marry into the royal family so that she could influence—"

Hartley interrupted. "Although why anyone would wish that on their sole offspring is beyond my comprehension."

Charles continued as if Hartley hadn't spoken. "As you can surmise, Lady Louisa was quite the thing. Beautiful, wealthy, impeccable heritage. She fell in love with the very poor Duke of Warfield, and her parents forbade the match. So Lady Louisa arranged to be deliberately caught in a

compromising situation with the duke, which set off a series of other young ladies following suit and also being ‘caught.’ The rash of forced marriages they had that summer.” She shook her head, but I saw the hint of a smile.

I watched as the duke reached out for the duchess’s hand, gazing at her adoringly. It was enough to make anyone’s heart flutter. “I think it’s sweet when people are that in love.”

Except for maybe Tin Man Hartley. “Grand passion is a refuge for those who have no imagination or little else to do.”

What? A man down on true love? What a surprise. I only just refrained from rolling my eyes.

He went on. “Their feelings for each other are unnatural.”

“Unnatural?” They’d probably be shocked at the places my mind went. “How?”

“The duke and duchess are never out of each other’s sight. They are annoyingly and openly affectionate with each other. And they both relentlessly dote on that child. They’ve refused to engage a nurse or governess for her.” He said it like this was the most scandalous and unbelievable thing ever.

“That actually sounds pretty natural to me.”

He raised that one eyebrow, only this time it wasn’t because he misunderstood but because he disagreed.

“When a dog gives birth, she doesn’t turn her puppies over to a dog of lesser breeding to raise.”

He leaned forward, letting his ice cream melt. Which felt like a shame. “Are you comparing nobility to dogs?”

“No.” I licked the back of my spoon, watching as his eyes followed the movement. “I wouldn’t want to insult the dogs.”

I could tell he wanted to laugh. But it probably would have ruined his street cred to have done so in a place like this. Instead his eyes just danced, making parts of me melt.

Charles had apparently tuned out our entire exchange. “The duchess has taken an oppositional political stance to her mother and does what she can to spite her. Including, the countess says, not having any sons to inherit the duchy. Lady Elizabeth is their only child that has survived infancy.” She turned, giving me her full attention. “Apart from the blood feud with her mother, the Duchess of Warfield is loved and respected by nearly the

entire *ton*. She sets fashion trends, and where she leads, everyone follows. If she takes a liking to you, there will be nothing else to concern us."

"Right." I sucked in a shaky breath, suddenly nervous. I used a napkin to wipe my lips, not wanting melted chocolate to ruin any chance I had.

It was then that the duchess looked at me, and with one cold glance, dismissed me.

"Wait. Does she know who I am?"

"Of course," Charles said. "She knows who everyone is."

"Did you not just see the glare of death? She doesn't want to talk to me."

"Come, I am going to arrange an introduction, and you will be a smashing success, I am certain of it."

"I witnessed the 'glare of death,' and I'm inclined to agree with Miss Blythe. I think this is going to blow up spectacularly in your faces." Hartley just had to add his two cents every chance he got.

"You are such a cynic," I said to him.

"There are great advantages to being a cynic. You are always right and rarely disappointed."

That was it. I would show him. I would make this duchess fall in love with me. Not romantically, obviously, but whatever the friend equivalent of that was, I was going to make it happen.

How, I had no idea.

Charles and I both stood, and I couldn't believe how much my hands were shaking. None of this mattered. I was going to go home, and James would marry somebody acceptable, and this would just all be some fond memory I'd pull out from time to time. There was zero reason to freak out. I needed to calm down and trust in all the things Charles had taught me. This would work out, and everything would be fine.

Just as I was pumping myself up, the daughter started to make a noise. Her face turned red, and I realized that she couldn't breathe.

"Darling, are you all right?" the duke asked, concerned.

The little girl shook her head, still unable to breathe. She gripped the sides of her table, trying hard to draw in some air.

"Henry, do something!" the duchess shrieked, looking totally panicked. Seconds ticked by, making me worry. Wasn't someone going to step up to save Lady Elizabeth? Did they not know how?

The duke pounded on her back, but it wasn't enough to help her. The little girl's face was turning a bizarre shade of purple, and I decided it was time to intervene.

As part of my lifeguarding duties last summer, I'd learned several lifesaving techniques, including the Heimlich. I ran over and pushed the duke out of the way. I wrapped my arms around Lady Elizabeth, and just as I'd been trained, I pulled back and up once, twice, and then the third time a large nut came sailing out of her windpipe. She collapsed to the ground, crying and heaving in air.

Her parents huddled on the ground next to her, hugging her. The duchess was sobbing, pressing her daughter close. Relief flooded my system, and I hadn't realized how wound up I'd actually been. I had been so focused on saving Lady Elizabeth that my own fear over the situation was just now kicking in. Not wanting to intrude on this private family moment, I started to go back to my table when the duchess reached out, grabbing my hand. She tugged me toward her.

Taking in a large breath, she stopped crying. "Miss Blythe," her voice was shaky. "I do hope you will do me the great honor of calling on me tomorrow. Because you are most welcome in my home anytime."

"Oh. Yeah. I mean, yes. I would love that."

The duchess squeezed my hand while the duke said, his voice thick, "Thank you."

I nodded back, feeling like it would have been weird to say "you're welcome" to that. Plus, I wasn't sure I could speak. The duke and duchess were making me really emotional. You could see how much they adored their daughter.

It made me glad that I had been there to help them.

When I did make my way back to Charles and Hartley, there was a look of respect and pride on Hartley's face that made my toes curl and my pulse flutter, and Charles looked giddy. "Brava. That was even better than I could have hoped for. Everyone here heard what she said. It is all managed. There is nothing else we need do."

The only thing we needed to do was deal with the James situation, if he ever showed up. And find that magic book. But it did make my shoulders feel lighter to realize that I didn't have to keep trying so hard to impress everyone. I'd saved the Duchess of Warfield's daughter, and it was about to make life a lot easier.

It wasn’t the first time I’d been wrong, and it certainly wouldn’t be the last.

* * *

Our visit the next day went even better than we could have hoped. The duchess was all sincere smiles and graciousness and had been beyond kind to both me and Charles. She thanked me so often that it had started getting embarrassing. Like I was some kind of hero when I’d just done what anybody would do. Well, anybody who’d had modern first aid training.

The house was flooded with invitations, as apparently all of London wanted to have us over. Just as Charles had predicted, now that I was in with the Duchess of Warfield, everybody else wanted to be my friend, too.

“When Hartley sees that all of society adores you, he won’t be able to resist!” Charles crowed as she went through the invitations.

“James,” I corrected for the umpteenth time. She didn’t respond and just wore a calculating smile that made me more than a little worried.

Deciding that I needed more dance tutoring before we went to a ball at some place called Almack’s, she sent for Mr. Watson. I decided to hang out in my room until he showed up, as all her frenetic planning was starting to make me feel unsettled.

That feeling was only exacerbated when I got to my bedroom. I didn’t know how I knew it, but something was off.

It might have been due in part to Sir Reginald being perched on my desk, which I’d never seen him do before.

My locked desk, where I kept all my future stuff hidden away. The locked desk to which I had the only key—a key which I had hidden under a loose floorboard I’d discovered in my room. The desk drawer was scratched, and it hadn’t been done by the cat. Somebody had been in here and had tried to break into my desk.

And I had a pretty good idea of who it had been.

Testing the drawer, I saw that it was still locked. My shoulders relaxed when I realized I hadn’t been found out.

Mrs. Farnsworth really did want to get something on me. And if she managed to bust that drawer open, I was done for. I decided to get the key to my bedroom and to start locking it behind me and to tell Hartley what had happened. I wouldn’t accuse her, because I couldn’t prove it, but I

knew he wouldn’t like it, and one way or another, she would find out he was displeased. Which would hopefully help keep me and my things safe.

Stephens himself came to fetch me when Mr. Watson arrived. He’d been doing that lately—tasks that involved me but should have been relegated to the footmen, he did himself. I thought it was probably due to the vase incident. Like he wanted to show me he was grateful by waiting on me personally. Which wasn’t necessary and I told him so, but he waved it off. Said he was honored to do it.

Honestly, I was sort of a lazy person to begin with, and I couldn’t decide if the whole servant thing was really bad for me. It had the potential to make me even lazier because there was always somebody around doing something for me.

I both loved it and felt guilty about it.

I told Stephens about the desk situation, which turned out to be a good thing. Like he was personally insulted that anyone would dare to mess around in my room. He said he’d get my bedroom door key and would discover who would “stoop to such a low degree.”

Lessons did not go well. Part of it was my stress over Mrs. Farnsworth going all 007. My nose still hurt from last night because I’d missed my Bioré strips and had tried to substitute hot wax to really disastrous and painful results. Not to mention when I’d also tried said hot wax on the redwood forest happening on my legs. I did it in one large section.

And after I woke back up after passing out, I decided I wouldn’t be trying that again anytime soon.

I probably should have confided in Charles about my personal hygiene situation, but as accepting as she was about the whole time travel thing, we didn’t really discuss our bodies. I tried once to ask her about the underarm situation, and she’d turned a shade of red I didn’t know a human could turn, and that had been that.

Hours later, Mr. Watson left for the evening in a cloud of disappointment. Which prompted Charles to say that she was in “dire need” of a walk. This was the one area where I wasn’t quite “up to snuff,” as Hartley would say. I got the quadrille okay, and the reels were fun. But the waltz was just not working out for me. Probably due in part to how uncomfortable it seemed to make my dance instructor. Apparently, this was like the nineteenth-century version of *Dirty Dancing* that Charles insisted I learn because she had procured some kind of permission for me

to dance this way. I tried to imagine Mr. Watson's face if I could take him to a London nightclub circa 2017. He'd probably die from shock.

Regardless, his uneasiness was throwing me off my game. Which, admittedly, was not all that great of a game to begin with. I liked dancing as much as the next girl, but this stuff was nothing like the shimmying Bex and I did when we went out.

Even though Mr. Watson had left, I decided to stay. I obviously needed the practice. I took off my dancing gloves because they were making me hot. I kicked them off to the side of the ballroom, then resumed my stance. I did the three-four count in my head. I tried to imagine some music but couldn't. We'd gone to only the one disastrous "you're a whore" ball, and I didn't remember any music. Obviously, there would be no boy bands or techno playing, so I was stuck with the counting. I should have taken that classical music appreciation class in college.

Twilight spread across the sky, and I watched through the massive floor-to-ceiling windows as the day started to give way to the night, accompanied by even more rain. But thankfully, no thunder.

Back straight, right arm up, left arm pretending to be on someone's shoulder while still holding a fan. Because obviously it wasn't bad enough to have to learn this dance. We had to add holding objects to up the difficulty factor. I shut my eyes, still counting.

I heard the steps of one of the footmen as he entered to light some candles for me. "Thank you!" I called over my shoulder.

Most likely, I looked completely ridiculous. But there was no choice. I had to do well. This would effectively be my big debut under Charles's and the Duchess of Warfield's protective wings. People would be watching me. I couldn't make a fool of myself. I couldn't do that to them.

Or to him.

At some point, I was going to get my watch out of that locked drawer, and I was going to time myself to see how long I could actually go without thinking about Hartley. Nothing had changed. He still wanted me to marry James. Kiss or no kiss, Hartley wasn't interested. Even if I did fantasize that he was.

Sighing, I shook my head. I was truly pathetic.

So pathetic, in fact, that instead of imagining some nameless, faceless guy dancing with me, I imagined Hartley.

It made me smile, and my feet seemed lighter. We were having one of those *everybody moved off the ballroom floor to watch us in all our magnificence* moments. I had a big fluffy dress like Belle in *Beauty and the Beast*, and we moved perfectly in time together. I tried to picture Hartley gazing at me with tenderness and affection and want in his eyes, but not even my imagination was that good.

I felt a large hand at my back, and someone took my free right hand. My eyelids flew open at the contact, and I might have gasped. My feet faltered to a stop, and I nearly crashed into him. I'd been so caught up in daydreaming about imaginary Hartley that I hadn't even heard the real one enter the room. All my senses were assaulted at once, and every single nerve I owned tingled with anticipation and excitement.

Stupid nerves.

And I probably should have said something, asked why he was holding me for the waltz and why he hadn't said anything when he came in the room and cut in on me and my imaginary partner. Instead I just stared at him. Loving the feel of his hands on me probably a lot more than I should have.

"My apologies," he said with a smile. Like somehow he knew exactly what I'd been thinking. "I did not mean to startle you. But it looked as if you lacked for a partner."

Still, more gaping. It seemed so unfair that any man could be this beautiful. And in the ever-darkening room, with only a few candles burning, he was practically godlike.

"Am I encroaching on your personal space bubble again?" he asked.

Suddenly, I didn't mind it quite so much. I wanted him to encroach. "No," I said in a voice too breathy and tight.

"Then, may I have this dance?"

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

THINGS I'M GOING TO INVENT IF I GET STUCK IN 1816

Dance-training videos. And the Internet and YouTube so I can post them and make a fortune.

Hartley had already been having this dance, even though he didn't know it. My throat closed in on itself, the awareness from being so close to him overwhelming. I had dropped my fan, but I was not going to pick it back up. I managed to nod at him and tentatively put my left hand on his shoulder. His very muscular shoulder. I ordered my fingers to hold still.

We stood as far apart as I always did with Mr. Watson, but this felt completely different. Electric heat radiated from his hands and made me tremble. Neither one of us had gloves on, and his bare hand holding mine made the whole thing seem kind of scandalous. And exciting.

And slightly terrifying.

"I'm not very good at it," I managed to whisper.

Something happy and bright danced in his eyes, and my stomach twisted in knots to see it. It was my real Hartley again. The fun, loving, quick-to-laugh one.

Which made sparkling butterflies and prancing unicorns take up residence inside me, trying to push away the panic and encouraging me to throw myself at him.

But I'd already learned the hard way that sparkling butterflies and prancing unicorns were absolutely not to be trusted.

"Then that is the fault of your partner. You need only to stay with me. Trust me. Follow where I lead."

The sparkling butterflies grew to Mothra sizes, sending shimmery glitter through every vein in my body. When he said stuff like that, his voice all silky and seductive, I was in danger of throwing my arms around his knees and begging him to love me forever.

I might have even been willing to give up air-conditioning when he sounded like that.

His hand splayed across the small of my back, pulling me toward him. At the same time, he pulled gently on my right hand. I took a step forward just as he stepped back.

It was too much. He was too much. I couldn't bear to look at him. I just knew that if he looked into my eyes, he'd see my reaction to him. *He wants you to marry his brother*, I told my hopeful self for the millionth time.

My hopeful self didn't care.

So I looked at my feet, watching the steps, following the pressure and guidance he gave me. I didn't know at what point my heart had started thumping so hard. But I finally understood that saying about your heart beating out of your chest. Something inside of me wanted to be set free and instinctively understood that only Hartley could help.

Somehow this was different than the night of the party. When I'd showed him slow dancing. I'd been in control then. I knew what I was doing. I'd even done it in part to see his reaction to it, to have a reason to be close to him.

I wasn't in control now. And I had absolutely no idea what I was doing.

Like always, his movements were all liquid gracefulness. Easy. Elegant. There was never any doubt in what he did, no hesitation, just a total and complete confidence. I shouldn't have been surprised. But I was surprised by the reality matching up to the fantasy. We moved as easily together in real life as we had in my head. Like, we were almost meant to dance together.

Obviously, I was reaching. But could anyone blame me?

We danced to the sounds of our feet tapping against the floor and the rustle of my skirts. Even without music, he kept perfect time. Why was he so freaking good at everything? It made me crazy. And made me like him even more. I felt torn between wanting to stay in his arms forever and wanting to run away and hide so that he wouldn't see how much I liked him.

"It is generally preferable whilst dancing to look upon your partner's countenance rather than the top of her head," he said.

Still, I didn't look up. "But what if she has a really nice scalp?"

I could hear the smile when he spoke. "Even the world's most perfect scalp would pale in comparison to a lovely face."

Inhaling a big breath, I looked up at him. I loved when he said something about me was lovely.

The hint of the smile hovered over his lips, but it faded as his gaze met mine. “Much better,” he said in a low voice that made my toes want to curl up.

Then I couldn’t have looked away even if I’d wanted to. He captured me with his eyes, and I felt like I was drowning in their depths.

The intensity, along with my corset, threatened to suffocate me.

I hoped I wouldn’t puke on his boots again.

Our dance continued on, slowly swirling around the empty ballroom. I wanted to blame my uneven breathing on the dancing.

But it was all due to him.

Maybe it was the ridiculously romantic setting. Or his peekaboo charm. Or that I felt worn out and was tired of worrying and trying to keep my distance. Something happened. It was probably my traitorous body trying to get what it had been craving. The distance between us became smaller and smaller until it was nonexistent. Somehow I got closer to him with each step.

Until I was pressed flush against him, still staring into his eyes. His right hand held me tightly in place, his left hand enveloping my right. My left hand had migrated down from his shoulder to his bicep. His extremely strong, nicely formed bicep. I nearly asked him to flex it for me, but I did manage a little bit of self-control.

Said self-control wasn’t going to last for much longer, though, because every cell in my body wanted more. I felt like somebody had dipped me in some kind of everlasting fire of wanting that refused to go out.

Our steps slowed until we were no longer dancing. Just standing, holding on to each other. His mouth was so close to mine that I could feel his breath on my lips. My heart did a series of flips at his expression.

Kiss me, I thought. *Kiss me, kiss me, kiss me*.

That one kiss, whether or not he thought it was a mistake, was always present in my mind. I had wanted a repeat. To see if what I’d felt had been legit or imagined. I leaned into him even more, and he tilted his head, studying me intently. He let go of my hand to push a stray strand of hair from my forehead. I couldn’t help it. I sucked in a sharp breath at the sensation. His fingers trailed down the side of my face, leaving little pools of fire everywhere he touched me.

Not imagined. Very, very real.

“Miss Blythe . . .” He sounded as wound up as I felt.

“Emma,” I reminded him for the millionth time. I mean, if he was going to kiss me, the least he could do was call me Emma. And he was going to kiss me, right?

Right?

I was breathing so hard I probably sounded like a winded elephant. My eyelids drifted shut in anticipation.

Then he totally withdrew from me. I opened my eyes to see that he had stepped back a few feet away. He bowed. I was supposed to curtsy back, but my knees weren’t exactly functioning properly.

“I thank you for the honor of a dance.”

What? He sounded so calm and collected, and I was a jumbled mess of frazzled nerve endings and disappointment.

He took long strides to one of the doors, and all I could do was stand where he’d left me, missing him desperately, wanting him back, but watching him go.

Pausing at the doorway, he turned around briefly, facing me. “You are an excellent dancer. All you needed was the right partner.”

My heartbeat zoomed up into my throat and then dropped with a thud down into my feet. What in the world was I supposed to make of that?

Then he left. I sank into a puddle in the middle of the floor, hanging my head. How did I keep letting this happen? I couldn’t keep wanting something more with someone who was so clearly not into it.

He was wrong. I didn’t need the right partner. What I needed was to face the reality of my situation and get back home.

* * *

Problem was, every minute of my day was now scheduled with either preparing for or attending some social activity. Which was nice after what had essentially been house arrest, but I found myself getting caught up in this lifestyle. Imagining that I could live here with Hartley and his family. That I could be happy.

I missed so many conveniences in my life back home, but I was finding so many things to like about here and now.

And I'd be a liar if I didn't admit that most of those things revolved around Hartley.

Some nights we stayed in, and those were always my favorite. When it was just the three of us, hanging out after dinner. I quickly found out that Charles didn't need help from alcohol to fall asleep in front of the fire with Princess on her lap, leaving me and Hartley alone to play checkers.

Where we did not talk about our kiss. Or about our dances. Or how we kept finding ways to touch each other.

Mostly we just talked about our lives. I told him things that I'd never told anyone else. Because I knew I could trust him. Whatever I confessed he would keep to himself and never share with another person. I knew it, on some basic level, and it loosened my tongue. He was so easy to talk to that it was hard to remember a time when he hadn't been part of my life.

I was still lying to him about the time travel and lying about all the feelings I was having for him. I had never been in love before, but I thought this might be it. It was unlike anything I'd ever experienced.

Being here, with him, it felt . . . right. Safe. Like for the very first time ever I had a place where I belonged. Where I was wanted.

With people who felt like family.

A home.

I tried not to smile too big when I, yet again, beat Hartley at checkers. He pretended to be upset, although he couldn't have actually been surprised, but he demanded we switch to chess so that he could have "satisfaction." I obliged.

Because I liked making him happy.

Because I could see a future for us. Not one back in the twenty-first century. But here. I would never be like Libby Amesbury. I wouldn't ask him to give everything up just for me. I understood that if I stayed, I would be giving everything up for him, but it was different. He had a title. Responsibilities and duties not only to his country but to his tenants and his businesses.

Hartley had a family. A family who loved him. They needed him here. I would never ask him to choose me over all of that.

Other than Bex, I didn't have anyone waiting for me. No ties, no obligations or expectations. I could stay.

This entire line of thinking was stupid and pointless. Of course I would go back. I had to. I didn't belong here, and who knew how I was messing

up the future by even being in 1816? Like that butterfly effect thing. Maybe I would be the cause of global warming. Maybe Germany would win World War II now or something and I had ruined the whole world because I couldn't find one simple spell.

Or I was giving myself more credit than I should have. Maybe I wasn't affecting anything. Maybe the timeline had already happened and I had always traveled back in time and everything I was now experiencing I'd already done and so it didn't matter because the future was set.

Just thinking about how it all worked made my head hurt.

And I had to remind myself that one hot kiss, two intoxicating dances, and quiet nights of checkers did not equal a relationship.

But could it? Could there be more?

It became my new obsession. Wondering. Daydreaming. Watching Hartley watch me. Because he did. He probably would have denied it, but there was something between us. Some undercurrent that sparked and sang when we were together, drawing us closer.

Or maybe I was delusional, and it was all in my head.

"Did I tell you that I had a letter from James today?"

Definitely delusional. That one sentence shattered all my white-picket-fence dreams. "Oh?"

"He hopes to return home a week from today."

Was it my imagination, or did Hartley not seem as excited as I thought he would be?

It was like somebody had hung a countdown clock on the wall. T minus seven days and James would be here. And Hartley would probably go back to being distant, and we wouldn't sit together and laugh and brush our fingers and legs against each other while we played.

My shoulders curled in as I realized this was all going to end.

The worst part? I hadn't even looked for my way home for the last three days.

That had to change.

The next morning, I was just not up to seeing people. I feigned a headache, and Charles went to make calls without me. Hartley planned to go riding, and I decided it was my chance to do something with that lock to the library so that I would always have access. Charles could have gotten me in, but she had seemed a lot less invested in searching lately.

But I couldn’t afford to keep being complacent. James had been this far-off, nebulous thing I didn’t have to worry about that had now become an actual threat. He would be back. I had a deadline.

I waited around in the foyer until Jamie let Hartley know that the groom had his horse outside. Hartley nodded to me on his way out, and I said, “May the horse be with you.”

He didn’t get it.

Once the house was quiet again, I took the two sharp knives I’d swiped from breakfast and went to work on the lock. Because they were pointy, I was definitely doing something, but I couldn’t tell what.

It wasn’t working. I needed help. Could they pick locks in this century? Even if they did, I had no idea where to buy the right tools or hire the right criminal. It wasn’t like I could go shopping online for them.

After half an hour with no success, I had to stop when there was the soft, timid sound of the brass knocker. Worried about being caught, I ran upstairs and closed my bedroom door just as the front door was answered.

Kicking off my shoes and taking off my stockings, I let out a sigh of relief. I only briefly wondered who was at the front door as I stashed my knives next to the desk key. The only thing I did know was that the caller wasn’t for me. Nobody ever came to see me.

I had just replaced the floorboard when there was a scratching at my door. I found Mrs. Farnsworth standing on the other side, smirking at me.

Uh-oh. That couldn’t be good.

I did get some small amount of enjoyment from knowing it probably made her nuts that Stephens had brought me my bedroom key and I could keep her locked out. No more entering and attempted breaking for her. “Can I help you with something?”

“Yes, Miss Blythe. There is a Miss Emily Blythe here to see Lord Hartley.”

Of all the possible things I had imagined she might say, that one didn’t even chart.

The real Emily Blythe had finally shown up. She was here. Like it wasn’t bad enough James was on his way. Now Emily Blythe was downstairs, waiting for Hartley. I felt sick to my stomach, and my lungs constricted so tight I couldn’t breathe. For a second I just froze. Totally froze. Unable to move, unable to think.

My entire lie was about to be blown to kingdom come. I had to get out in front of this. Fix it.

Keep Hartley and Mrs. Farnsworth from finding out the truth.

Because if they did, I was totally done for. I ran downstairs in my bare feet. I didn't care about decorum or manners or any of it. I cared only about protecting my secret.

Running into the drawing room, I saw a small, pretty brunette with a tired-looking bonnet and raggedy gloves on. "Miss Blythe?" I asked, out of breath. She stood up when I spoke, putting her hand against her chest.

"Yes?"

"I'm Emma. Could you come with me, please? I think we need to talk. In private. Up in my room." Away from prying eyes and eavesdropping ears. I smiled, hoping that I was conveying that I wasn't actually a crazy person and she could trust me.

I knew what I was asking was strange, but to my great relief she listened and followed me. I passed Mrs. Farnsworth on the stairs, refusing to meet her stare. If the woman had been smarter and more devious, she would have questioned Emily instead of coming up to my room to gloat. The housekeeper didn't try to interfere or ask any questions, but this wasn't over.

But for now, it was all about containment.

I said a quick prayer that Hartley's horse would get whatever the horse equivalent of a flat tire was. The very last thing I needed was him coming home.

And discovering that I was a complete liar.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

THINGS I'M GOING TO INVENT IF I GET STUCK IN 1816

Family therapy, geared toward dads who sell their daughters (!)

Ushering Emily into my room, I closed and locked the door shut behind me. I dragged the chair from my desk and put it on the opposite side of the room, away from the door. "Please, have a seat. Make yourself comfortable."

Emily had huge, wary, light-brown eyes. She looked like a fragile porcelain doll. It wasn't just her outerwear that was ragged. So was her dress. It looked like times had been tough. I remembered that the Blythes had agreed to this arranged marriage because of the money. I rang the bell for Rosemary as hard as I could.

I sat down on my bed, across from her. What should I even say to her? "We've been expecting you for a while." That seemed safe-ish.

"Yes," she said, her voice shaking. "I should have come weeks ago. I made a poor decision. And now I'm afraid that I need help."

It was jarring to hear another American accent, although it wasn't exactly like mine. "Anything. I'll do anything I can to help you."

Tears filled her eyes, making them brighter. She opened her mouth to speak but couldn't. I leaned forward, putting my hand on top of hers. "It's okay. You can say whatever you need to say. Where have you been?"

Gathering her strength, calming herself down, she took in a shaky breath. "I boarded the ship to England, as my father wanted, although it broke my heart. Back in Boston I was in love with Joseph. Joseph Anderson." Her eyes took on a dreamy quality. "But he was an apprentice blacksmith, and my father did not approve of the match."

Did any parents in this century keep their opinions to themselves? If their kids were happy, what did they care who married who?

Or whom. Whatever.

Emily looked uncomfortable. I remembered these people weren't really the sharing-of-emotions type. "Anything you say to me, I will never repeat

it. I promise you. Please let me know what happened and how I can help. So your father didn't let you marry the man you wanted to marry."

Another sigh. "And my heart was broken. Everything was made worse by my chaperone taking ill on the voyage, unable to leave her room. She . . . she died."

That was terrible. "I'm so, so sorry."

"Which left me alone, when I should not have been alone. And I met someone. A sailor on the ship named Ian Clifford. British." More unshed tears, and her voice had gone soft and then hard. "He was so charming. So . . . amiable and kind. He made me forget. Everything. Everyone."

I certainly got that. The one time Hartley had drunkenly kissed me, the entire world had gone away, and he was the only thing in it.

"He wanted us to marry. Had the captain of the ship do it. I was impetuous and foolish, but it all seemed so . . . romantic." She took a handkerchief from her sleeve and dotted her eyes with it. I got the impression she was the type who cried a lot. "Mr. Clifford became . . . different after we wed. Lord Hartley had given my father an allowance to purchase me new clothes, and Mr. Clifford thought I was wealthy." She let out a sad-sounding, broken bark of laughter. "When he discovered that I was as poor as he, he was furious."

"Did he hurt you?" I asked. Even if it meant my lie was uncovered, I didn't care. If this Clifford guy hit Emily, I was going to have Hartley hunt him down and shoot him.

"Not in the way you are thinking, but I discovered that words can be painful. He left me in his home with his mother, where I became like a servant to her. I have been waiting and waiting for him to return, hoping that things might improve, but when he came back from his latest voyage, I discovered that he was a terrible drunk and that he and his mother had been selling off all my clothing. I had nothing left and no way to leave. I decided to swallow my pride and come here. I am sorry to ask for it, but I need help. I want to go back to America. Back to Mr. Anderson, if he will still have me. I don't want to be a countess. I just want to be happy."

In that moment it had nothing to do with me. It was about saving this woman from a terrible life and an even worse marriage. Rosemary had said something about selling old clothes to make money. I had a closet full of them. Emily could have them all. "Then that's what we're going to do. We're going to give you the money to go back to America."

The scratch at the door let me know that Rosemary had finally arrived. I opened the door just a crack and told her I didn't care how it happened, but she had to send the footmen to track down Charles and bring her back. I didn't know how long it would take to sell all my stuff, but between me, Rosemary, and Charles, I knew we would figure it out.

When I had again locked my door, Emily asked, "But what will I tell my father? How will I face everyone? How will I tell Mr. Anderson that I am not . . . not . . . innocent?" I could hear how painful that last word was for her to say, as her face turned a bright red.

"That's easy enough." And it really was. There was no Internet here. No phones. No way for anyone to verify truths or lies. "You married James Portwood, just as your father and Lord Hartley wanted you to. But he died. Of . . ." What did they die of here? "Influenza. Or Ebola. It doesn't matter. So you decided to go back to your family in America to mourn your loss. Who could blame you for that?"

She nodded, looking thoughtful. "That could work. But what if my father writes to Lord Hartley? I am certain he will."

"I will bribe every footman in this house if I have to. That letter will never reach Hartley. I'll make sure of it. I give you my word."

Emily got up out of her chair, coming over to grab both of my hands. "I know we've only just met, and I cannot thank you enough for your charity and kindness toward me."

Part of me felt guilty, because said charity and kindness had selfish motivations. I really did want to help her, though. I invited her to sit down next to me on the bed, and we planned her next move until Charles arrived.

Charles took the chair Emily had been sitting in, back ramrod straight as we told her the whole story. I explained that I wanted to sell my dresses to finance Emily's trip back home.

"You will do nothing of the sort. I will buy her ticket, find a suitable, healthy chaperone to escort her, and buy her some decent clothes. No one will believe her story if she turns up in rags."

Relief, acute and painful, filled every part of me. Emily was sobbing, and I could feel the tears welling up in my own eyes, and a large lump settled in my throat. "Thank you." I could barely get the words out.

"We must not waste time. This must all be taken care of immediately before the servants catch wind of it. Who knows?"

“Just Mrs. Farnsworth. I didn’t tell Rosemary any details. I just asked her to find you as soon as possible.”

“That would be easy enough to explain to your maid.” In her all-black dress, Charles looked like an avenging angel. “But it sounds as if the housekeeper may present a problem. I shall take care of that as well.”

I had never wanted to hug someone so much in my entire life. Charles told Emily to lie down and rest and had me accompany her into the hallway. When the door was shut, leaving us alone, I gave in to my impulse.

“I know you guys don’t really do this here, but I’m sorry. I have to hug you.” And I did. She was warm and comforting and it was what I imagined it would be like to hug my own mom, if she had lived.

Her hands patted me awkwardly on the back. It had made her uncomfortable, but she could suck it up for a few more seconds.

Finally releasing her, I smiled. “That was almost thunderstorm bad.”

She knit her eyebrows in confusion, not understanding me.

“This whole Emily thing was almost worse than a raging thunderstorm.” It was the most scared I’d felt in a very long time.

“You will leave everything to me, and I will take care of it all. Find your maid, explain that you were having feminine troubles and wanted to speak with me. I will have Danvers arrange for my personal coach, and Miss Emily Blythe will be on the next boat home to America.”

I hoped she appreciated the restraint it took to not hug her again. I’d had no idea what I was doing. And I’d been about to involve Rosemary. Who I thought I could trust, but what if I couldn’t? What if she’d told just one person? Even inadvertently? It would have ruined everything.

But I knew Charles would do exactly as she said. And I had nothing more to worry about.

Until Mrs. Farnsworth came down the hallway, a victorious sneer marring her features. “Mrs. Meriweather, did you need me to send one of the footmen to fetch Lord Hartley?”

“Whatever for?” Charles asked, peering down her nose at the housekeeper.

For a moment Mrs. Farnsworth looked confused. “For the current situation.”

“Situation?” Charles repeated, sounding even more grand and snooty. “Miss Blythe has had a visitor from America call on her. Are you speaking

of that situation? Why would that merit the earl's attention?"

The housekeeper's hard veneer cracked, and she didn't look quite so sure of herself. "The young woman who arrived, she said she was Miss Emily Blythe."

"I'm afraid you are quite mistaken. She said she was looking for Miss Emma Blythe, guest of Lord Hartley." From her tone, Charles was just daring Mrs. Farnsworth to disagree with her.

Which we all knew she wouldn't.

And the lie was good enough and close enough to the truth that now Mrs. Farnsworth would probably be questioning what she had actually heard. And she would never dare contradict Charles.

Charles was a freaking genius. And a really, really good liar.

With a bob of her head and a slight curtsy, Mrs. Farnsworth excused herself.

"I really want to hug you again."

At that, Charles finally smiled. "Keep that girl in your room until I return, and do not let anyone in to talk to her. Not even Hartley."

"Like Hartley would ever go in my room." Much as I might have personally enjoyed it, he had that whole honor/chivalry thing going on.

But for some reason that made her pause. "Has anything happened between you and Hartley? Has he compromised you in any way?"

Compromised me? I considered joking that I'd been totally compromised, even if I still wasn't sure what that meant, but she was serious and scary enough that I didn't want to joke. Or tell her that we'd kissed. And danced. "Nothing's happened. We're just friends." At least by my century's standards, anyway. So it wasn't technically a lie. Just misinformation.

Misinformation or not, I was getting tired of all the lies.

She left, and I watched over a sleeping Emily in my room, not answering the door whenever a servant came to check on me.

About an hour later, Charles returned with some servants from her home and left with Emily. Emily held my hands again, wishing me every happiness in the world. I told her to have a good life.

And then she was gone.

Which meant I was safe.

I didn't know what I would have done without the richest woman in England backing me. I tried telling myself that I had done the right thing.

Not just for me, but for Emily. Professor Blythe had his money, Emily had her way back home. Everybody had been taken care of.

Everybody except for Hartley.

He still expected a bride for his brother. And I'd just had Charles put her on a boat for America.

Some part of me thought I should come clean and just tell him the truth.

But what if he didn't understand? What if he thought I should be tossed out? He didn't know that magic was real and his sisters were witches.

He wouldn't believe me.

What if he did?

I told the voice to shut up. And I got angry. Which made no sense. I didn't know who I was angry at.

Another part of me worried that this had all been too easy and would eventually catch up with me.

Matters weren't helped when Hartley returned home about twenty minutes after Charles left. I had worked myself into a self-justified frenzy, which he couldn't have known when he requested to see me.

When I came into the library, ready to pick a fight, just the sight of how handsome he was, how blue his eyes looked, how broad his shoulders were, infuriated me.

"James wrote again to say that his schedule is proceeding as planned, and he still hopes to return home as expected."

The real Emily Blythe had just been here, and it wouldn't matter to Hartley if I were her or me. I was totally interchangeable with some other random chick and unimportant to him except as a pawn in his schemes. "What if I don't want to marry your stupid brother? I can say no."

Hartley, rightfully so, looked surprised by my tone and words. "I'm afraid you can't."

"Yes, I can. You are not the boss of me." Fantastic. My irrational anger and fear had reduced me to playground arguments.

Then he didn't even respond. Like I wasn't worth listening to or acknowledging. Which literally made me see red and made my limbs start to shake with fury. I grabbed a gold-and-white vase next to me. "Is this expensive or sentimental?"

"Not particularly either, why?"

He had his answer in pieces all over the floor when I threw it at him and missed. My aim was terrible. I should practice more.

“Why do you keep throwing things at me?” he demanded.

I couldn’t answer. I wasn’t a thrower. Before I met him, I’d honestly never thrown anything at anyone. This wasn’t his fault. It was mine. I was upset and worried, and I’d taken it out on him when I’d had no reason to.

The fight in me fled, leaving me feeling hollow and ashamed. “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have. I don’t know what’s wrong with me.” I went over and started picking up the pieces, piling them up in my skirt.

He let out a long sigh. “Stop. I will have one of the servants . . .”

Although I guessed he was going to tell me that he would have one of the servants clean up the mess, I picked up a particularly sharp piece and sliced my index finger from top to bottom. Blood began to well along the incision. “Oh wow. I cut myself and . . .”

Then the world went dark, and I felt the back of my head hit the hardwood floor.

When I woke up, I was back on the couch, with my finger bandaged and Hartley towering over me. “Why does blood make you faint?”

“It’s called a vasovagal response. That accident that killed my par—my mother, I was there, too. It was during a thunderstorm, and there was apparently a lot of blood. I don’t remember either thing because I was so young, but I’m scared to death of thunderstorms, and blood always makes me pass out.” I looked up at him from under my lashes. “Thank you for taking care of me.” I didn’t deserve it, especially after I ruined his pretty vase and acted crazier than a coked-out wolverine.

Hartley sat down on the table next to me. I could feel the delicious heat emanating from his body, and I wanted to reach out and have him hold me.

Even though I knew it was impossible.

“Miss Blythe . . .” His words sounded strained, as if he couldn’t or didn’t want to say them.

“Yes?”

Then he did something unexpected. He took my injured hand, warming it with his own. He had such fantastic, strong hands. Heat spread from them to mine and then traveled along every vein in my body until I again had that feeling of being burned alive. But in a good way.

He leaned in even closer, with that look in his eyes. The one he’d had outside my door when we kissed. I couldn’t help it. My breath hitched in response, and my heart pounded against my chest. Hard.

His gaze drifted down to my lips, and I bit the bottom one in response. His eyes heated with blue flames.

Finally. My body wanted to cheer from absolute joy. He was going to kiss me.

Here. In his library. In the middle of the day. Where anybody could walk in on us.

When I became aware of our surroundings, I took my hand from his and tried to even out my breathing. I sat up and backed away from him. I couldn't look at him. If I kept playing with fire, it would be only a matter of time until I got completely consumed. I didn't fully understand what had just happened or why I had stopped it. Maybe Charles's lessons had more of an effect than I realized?

He didn't seem to understand, either. After a few heartbeats of silence, he said, "I wanted to ask you to let Aunt Charles know that I will be at my club for the evening." He sounded distant, cold.

Such a contrast to what I had just seen and felt.

I nodded. We were supposed to all go to dinner at the Worthingtons'. Hartley didn't usually ditch out once Charles had made plans. I wondered whether he was angry with me or with himself.

Because I was currently having the same internal struggle. I needed to stay away from Hartley and get back home.

But every time he got close, all I wanted to do was get lost in him again.

I couldn't let that happen.

CHAPTER TWENTY

THINGS I'M GOING TO INVENT IF I GET STUCK IN 1816

Noise-canceling headphones. Or earplugs. Anything to block out the sound.

Hours later, Hartley sat at a table by himself. A glass of port rested in front of him, but he did not partake. Despite being tempted to drink until he could no longer remember his name, he refrained.

He had to keep his wits about him. James would be home soon, he would marry Emma, and his life would return to normal.

Even as he thought it, he knew it to be untrue.

White's was as boring that evening as it was any other evening he'd stopped in. He had no interest in drinking to excess or smoking or betting on which raindrop would fall down the pane first on the window nearest the door. He had even less interest in card playing, given that his current sobriety gave him the upper hand over every foxed sot in the room.

But he had to be away from the house. It was too difficult to sit in any room knowing that Emma would be somewhere in the house, just tantalizingly out of reach. He could not act on his wants or impulses as he nearly had earlier that afternoon. She was going to wed James, and that was that. Not to mention that she was a guest in his home and under his protection, and honor dictated that he rein in his impulses.

So he did the only thing he could—removed himself from the situation entirely. Which meant that instead of enjoying the comforts of his home, he found himself surrounded by blabbering fools in a smoky, musty room that smelled of sour wine. The thunder outside shook the room, lightning illuminating the darkened sky. The storm perfectly matched his raging emotions and uncontrollable thoughts.

It was why he refused this night to drink. To stay master of himself. To remain in control. Because when it came to Emma, the self-control had all but disappeared.

He found himself entertaining thoughts of her that were neither appropriate nor welcome. And even worse, he no longer felt as if he was betraying Libby when he had them.

Without his consent, his mind began to compare the two women. Where Libby was worldly and sophisticated, Emma was refreshingly wholesome and unaware. Libby knew how the societal game was played, and she had been a master player. Emma was at the mercy of the protection he, Charles, and the Duke and Duchess of Warfield had given her. While her manners had improved, she still sometimes seemed at a loss, never quite sure what to do or what to say.

A smile crept up on his lips as he thought of her often-outrageous pronouncements. Which he didn't want. He wanted someone calm. Soothing. Libby would have been such a wife. A perfect helpmeet, a domestic goddess like Hestia who would have kept the home fire burning and his life running perfectly.

His ruminations on Libby Amesbury were interrupted by thoughts of Emma in the robes of Artemis, deliberately stirring up the tempest. She was no keeper of the hearth. She would cause the sea to roil and crash, the wind to blow, the skies to lightning and thunder.

She'd already had such an effect on him. Stirred him up. Challenged him. Questioned him. Baffled him. Confused him. She was unlike any other woman he had ever known. And while he found himself slightly annoyed by her a large percentage of their time together, he found that when they were apart, he was always thinking of her. Of what would make her laugh and bring a smile to her lovely green eyes. Of what things might amuse her, how he might baffle and confuse her in return.

Most disturbingly of all, he found that far too often his mind drifted to what it would be like to try to tame that whirlwind, to again feel the fury and the passion of the storm on Emma's lips, in her embrace.

She made him forget his mistakes, his regrets. She so filled his mind and soul that he had room for only her. Despite his vow to never forget, he hardly ever thought of Libby any longer. It was an effort to do so. Because she had been crowded out by the wily, tempestuous Emma, who was upending his life. He couldn't even conjure up an image of what Libby had looked like. There was only Emma.

The women were not the same. And he found himself exceedingly glad for it.

He wondered if this were all his fault. If he had set himself up for failure without even realizing it. By proclaiming Emma untouchable, by marking her as his brother's, he had created the type of challenge he had a hard time resisting. Perhaps this was the reason for her desirability. She had become a forbidden fruit.

Nothing else made sense. She did not behave as a woman ought to behave. She fancied herself his equal. She didn't defer to him or try to use her wiles to manipulate him. She had no title and no money and acted as if it didn't matter.

Perhaps it doesn't, something whispered inside him.

His pensive mood was interrupted when a footman from his home entered the room. The young man looked panicked. What had Emma called this boy? Tommy? George? He grit his teeth in frustration. William was bloody good enough before Emma came, and it would be bloody good enough now.

"William!" he called to get the lad's attention. The footman rushed over, and Hartley saw that he had not been mistaken about the fear he thought he'd seen. Hartley got to his feet immediately.

"My lord," the young man bowed. "Mrs. Meriweather sent me. Miss Blythe is missing."

Missing? An inexplicable terror seized his heart. Hartley grabbed his overcoat and ran to the door, out to his waiting carriage. As soon as the door closed behind him, the carriage darted out into the street.

Was this his fault? Had he scared her with his ungentlemanly behavior? He tried to dismiss the welling sense of fear that wanted to overtake him. Missing? Where could she have possibly gone? Would she leave without telling him? Without saying goodbye?

Why did it matter so much to him if she had?

Time seemed to slow down despite his impatience, and he was aware of every drawn-out moment that passed, how every hurried heartbeat exacerbated his fear. The carriage came to a sudden halt. From the exchange of angry voices outside, he knew it might be a while before the streets cleared. He contemplated whether it would be faster to unhitch one of the horses and ride on his own until he realized how close they were to home. He threw open the door, jumped to the sidewalk, and began running through the downpour.

The raging thunder matched his heart, filling all his senses, making it impossible to think.

The front door of his townhome was open, and the sight filled him with dread. He bounded up the steps and called out, demanding to know what was happening.

Because Emma couldn't be missing. She wouldn't leave him without saying a word. She wouldn't.

A gaggle of servants had gathered in the foyer, all looking concerned. Stephens approached him, reaching for his soaking coat. "Rosemary went to check on Miss Blythe and found her bed empty and was unable to locate her anywhere else. She woke the household, and we have been searching for her ever since."

Lightning flashed through the still-open door, and Hartley didn't want to imagine Emma out alone in a storm like this. Especially with how much she feared them. He ran his fingers through his soaked hair, shaking off the excess.

"Have you searched every room?"

"We have only just begun to search room by room, my lord."

Hartley nodded, and Stephens left him. He heard the sound of the servants upstairs calling her name, moving aside furniture, opening doors. The ones still standing in the foyer were receiving their search assignments. He intended to go upstairs to help, but he noticed that his study door was slightly ajar. Something pulled at him, leading him in that direction. He pushed both doors open. A great fire roared in the fireplace, but the room had no other light.

"Emma?" he called out, his concern so great that he didn't notice he'd called her something he shouldn't. His heart beat heavily. He didn't like this sensation, this worry, this sense of protectiveness he felt for her.

The room had probably already been searched. That was why the door was open.

Then he heard the sniffle.

It came from his desk. He sprinted across the room, pulling out the large chair. Emma was curled up in a ball underneath the desk, her arms wrapped around her legs.

The relief that flooded his chest was palpable. He murmured thanks to the Almighty and crouched down next to her.

She had been crying. Her entire body seemed to be shaking.

Relief was replaced with concern. “What happened?”

Emma shook her head, her hair falling loosely around her shoulders.

“I cannot help you if you will not tell me what happened.”

Still she said nothing and only trembled as an answer.

Trying one last time, he said, “Please, come out.”

She didn’t respond, didn’t look at him. Concern gave way to the same sort of fear and panic he’d felt earlier. This was so unlike the woman he knew. So he reached out and took her, hefting her up into his arms. As he had countless times before, he carried her over to the sofa near the fireplace, setting her down gently. Given that she was in her nightclothes, he meant to stay a respectable distance away from her, but as soon as he tried to move she tangled her hands into his shirtfront and refused to let go.

He tried gently to pry her hands off. “I have to tell the others that I found you.”

“Don’t go,” she whispered.

His heart did a queer flip. “I will be right back. I give you my word.”

That seemed to satisfy her, and she loosened her grip. He went out into the foyer, calling for Stephens. The elderly butler appeared at the top of the stairs. “I have found her in my study, but she is in need of some blankets.”

“Shall I have tea sent in as well?”

“Yes.”

Stephens nodded and went off to procure the blankets and tea. Hartley turned back into his study and saw Emma curled up in the corner of the sofa, her head tucked down. She rocked back and forth.

He sat down tentatively next to her, unsure of what was wrong or how he could fix it. Was it only the storm? She had been afraid of a storm before, but she had not behaved like this. Although this storm was much worse. Thunder slammed against the side of the house, and she jumped, making a scared, mewling sound. He hated that he could not help her. And he hated that she was suffering.

One of the maids rushed in carrying a pile of blankets. Hartley took them wordlessly, wrapping one after another around Emma’s shoulders. “Would you please have someone fetch my aunt?”

The maid nodded and quickly left.

Mrs. Farnsworth came a few moments later, disapproval etched deeply into her features as she set the tea service down. She looked as if she might want to say something, but Hartley never tolerated impertinence from servants, which she well knew. He almost wanted her to be disrespectful, to speak out of turn, as he would have liked nothing more in that moment than the chance to rebuke her. He needed a release from this worry.

But the housekeeper left wordlessly, and he was still alone with a silent and shaking Emma.

The rain drummed against the windows in a constant rhythm, and the thunder seemed to peal continuously, one right after the other.

"The thunder . . . ," she finally managed.

Of course the storm was to blame. He hoped it was the only thing making her this afraid. Terrified. This was not his Emma. Instinct guided him to move closer to her, to wrap his arms around her. He settled her onto his shoulder, running his hand over her unbound hair, whispering soothing, nonsensical words to her.

Hartley judged himself to be the worst kind of cad. Here she shivered in fright, and all he could think of was the silky softness of her hair, how he loved her orange-blossom-and-vanilla scent. How he wanted to kiss her into mindless oblivion until she forgot all her fears.

Instead he sat quietly, holding her. It was inappropriate, but he couldn't help himself. He tried not to react when her arms stole around his torso. He ignored the slow thudding of his heart, steeling himself against the desire that swirled inside him.

"You're all wet," she murmured.

"Yes. I got caught in the rain. Would you like me to go upstairs and change?"

Her grip tightened around him. "Please don't leave me."

"I will stay with you for as long as you need me," he reassured her.

They sat that way for a good while longer in their silent embrace while the storm raged around them. He found himself acutely aware of her soft, sweet breaths, of every movement she made, every time she shifted her head or moved closer to him. He enjoyed every second of it.

And to his great consternation he wanted more of it. Much more.

Where was his aunt?

The storm finally began to abate, the thunder slowly rolling off into the distance, leaving them in quiet and darkness. He could sense how her body relaxed, hear how her breathing evened out.

“I’m sorry I’m so stupid,” Emma finally spoke, looking up at him. He tried not to look at her lips, to be a friend to her. A future brother-in-law.

But his feelings in that moment were anything but brotherly. “Not in the least.”

She let out a little laugh before bowing her head. “I’m a complete and total mess, and I think we both know it.”

He put one finger under her chin and made her look at him again. “I think you are a brave, fascinating, intoxicating woman.”

Hartley regretted the words as soon as he’d said them.

Not because he didn’t mean them.

But because he did.

Her lips parted in response, and it was very nearly his undoing. He felt a desperate need to change the current and dangerous topic of conversation. “Why did you hide in my study?”

“I don’t know. It’s usually locked, and I’ve wanted to get a key or maybe pick the lock or break it or something because it’s always locked, but tonight it wasn’t. I just ran from my room and ended up here. And I stayed because . . .” Her words trailed off, as if she stopped to choose them carefully. The emotion in her eyes stunned him. “I stayed because it’s your study. It made me feel safe. Because you make me feel safe.”

* * *

Of all the many things I had not intended to admit, that one was pretty high up on the list. Even if it was true. Because I’d never, ever felt as safe as I had in this home.

Or, more importantly, as safe as I felt now in Hartley’s arms.

His jaw clenched. “Don’t.”

“Don’t what?”

He didn’t answer. His jaw remained tight, like he was clamping his teeth together. For some reason it gave me courage.

Because why couldn’t we just say how we felt? That we were attracted to each other? That we liked each other? That kissing each other was the most amazing thing ever? I was so tired of being afraid.

And it wasn’t like I hadn’t already broken like ten thousand of their rules. I was in my nightgown, we were alone together, and it was the middle of the night.

I just didn’t care. Our time together was coming to an end one way or another, and I wasn’t ready for it.

Not without this.

Gathering up what little bravery I had left, I shrugged the blankets off my shoulders and moved my arms away from his chest and up to his neck. Part of me was afraid he’d push me off. But he didn’t. His entire body had tensed up, though.

He’d kissed me when we were both drunk, and it had been the most glorious thing I’d ever experienced.

Now I needed to know what it would be like if he actually meant it.

“Hartley?”

“Yes?” He sounded like somebody was strangling him.

“Do you want to kiss me?”

If I thought he’d been tense before, that had been nothing compared to how rigid he went. “You are to marry my brother.”

Some feminine part of me sensed victory. “That wasn’t an answer to my question. Do you want to kiss me?” I emphasized each word in my last sentence carefully.

He swallowed again. “It is not that I don’t desire to kiss you. I cannot be dishonorable in that way.”

My cloudy, lust-driven brain jumped on the one word that mattered most. “So you do ‘desire’ to kiss me?”

Several agonizing moments passed before he finally said, lowly, “Very much.”

That was all the encouragement I needed.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

THINGS I'M GOING TO INVENT IF I GET STUCK IN 1816

Chapstick. Because . . . dang.

I pressed my lips against his, and he instantly responded. The kiss felt gentle and caring, tender and sweet. Like he was afraid I would break after all my earlier drama. I sighed against his mouth. This was better than I'd remembered. Better than I'd daydreamed. It was awesome. No wonder they wrote so many songs about this stuff. Because the blood rushing through me gave me this dizzy weightlessness where I needed to hang on to him to ground me.

His hands moved up to my neck, to my hair, pulling me deeper into the kiss. I pressed myself against him, holding on even tighter. I wanted to melt into him. I wanted this kiss to last forever and ever. And now that I knew time travel existed, we probably really could kiss for all time.

I forgot to be afraid. Forgot about the storm and about how dumb I acted. I could concentrate only on his lips nibbling at mine, soothing, exciting. That safe, secure, delicious feeling was back. It felt like I'd broken open a glow stick inside me, and the luminescent warmth was spreading throughout my body. Like the fun part of being drunk again. Only I was getting drunk on Hartley, and I was hoping there would be no hangover.

He cupped my face in his hands, and I wanted to sigh with pleasure again. Whoever taught guys to do that should get a freaking medal. It did the most amazing things to my insides. His fingers felt so strong and warm against my neck, my cheeks, along my hairline. My skin burned everywhere he caressed.

I also loved that I could touch him back. I loved the roughness of the stubble on his jaw, the masculine cut of it. I tugged at that stupid cravat thing around his neck, wanting to taste the skin on his throat, but I couldn't get it undone. The knot was too complicated for my fumbling fingers. So I

settled for playing with his silky, short hair, which he seemed to really like.

Our breath and lips tangled together, the same way he tangled his fingers in my hair over and over again. Sparkling tingles ran between my lips, my heart, and my belly.

Even though he handled me like I was precious and special, even though his kiss was technically chaste and sweet, it felt like we were standing at the top of a really high cliff. And if we both let go, there would be nothing but hunger. Desire. Desperation. Passion. I could feel how tightly he kept himself in check, and all those emotions and wants simmering just beneath the surface. The electric heat of those repressed actions hung heavy in the air between us.

I sensed how easy it would be to push just a little. To make us both let go and freefall to a more fun and exciting place. To make him show me how much he wanted this, wanted me, even though he acted like he didn't.

Decision made, I was about to rock his world when a big, nonthunder crashing sound made both of us jump. I heard Charles scolding her corgi. I moved away from Hartley, and he stood in front of me, protecting me from view, letting me have the chance to wrap a blanket around me and cover up. My skin was hot and flushed, and I couldn't help but press my fingers against my lips. Even his restrained, demure kisses made my lips feel delectably sensitized.

I didn't know why he made the effort, because anybody who saw us would know exactly what we'd just been doing. I did love that his first thought was to protect me.

That kiss had been what I'd wanted for the longest time, but it wasn't enough. The frustration made me crazy.

Charles came through the open door. I probably should have realized that the door wasn't shut before I tried to take us to Make-Out City. "I came to see after Emma. It is rather late."

"Of course." How did he do that? How did he sound so calm and collected, while I'd been standing on the precipice of Hurricane Hartley? Ready to be caught up in all the things he made me feel?

"Y-yes." Just one syllable, but I somehow still managed to stutter. And it wasn't even a logical response to what they'd both said. I got up, being careful to not touch Hartley as I moved past him. I just knew that if I so

much as brushed against his sleeve, I'd fall to my knees and beg him to love me, to not make me marry his brother.

Part of me wanted him to stop me. To tell me that he'd felt that, too. That there was more between us than an in-law relationship.

That he couldn't bear the thought of me marrying James.

But he didn't say it. And even though I'd kissed him, again, and he'd liked it, I knew deep down that it didn't change anything. So I said the only thing I could. "Good night."

I was already on the stairs when I heard him repeat, "Good night." And he didn't sound quite as calm as he had when he'd spoken to Charles.

Charles remained surprisingly and suspiciously quiet until we got to my room. "You know, it just occurred to me that I told you this morning I was deathly afraid of thunder. Did you do this?"

"My dear, do you think me capable of controlling the very weather?" she asked, all sweetness and light. But I saw the self-satisfied smirk behind the protestation of innocence.

Witches.

I had been suspecting that even though Charles knew my situation, she still wanted me to get together with Hartley. Was she not aware of his no-love/no-marriage policy? Or did she just not care?

"Were there any developments that I should be made aware of?"

"What do you mean?"

"Were you compromised?" she asked, her tone slightly embarrassed.

Ah. Her favorite question. I really was going to have to find out what that meant, especially since I kept denying it. "Not to the best of my knowledge." I had to know this one thing, though. "What would happen if I were compromised?"

A grin as big as the Cheshire Cat's took up most of her face. "Then Hartley would have to marry you, of course. He is a gentleman, after all."

I had the distinct feeling that she'd been counting on that. And that compromising was a lot worse than a spy being found out or two parties settling a dispute. It meant something bigger here.

Escaping to my room, I had to wake up Rosemary, who had fallen asleep sitting up in my chair. "Miss Blythe! I was so worried about you!" And even though people didn't like hugging here, I kind of felt like she needed one. Rosemary let me hug her for a moment before she shook me off and pulled back the covers. "You should get some rest."

The exhaustion crept up on me, slamming into me like waves against a rock. I got into bed without protest, wanting to just sleep. But I still had to find out whether or not I'd been compromised. "Rosemary, what does it mean if a man compromises you?" I had my suspicions, but I didn't know if it would match the British nineteenth-century version.

My lady's maid looked super embarrassed.

"Look, somebody has to tell me so I know whether or not it's happening. I will just bug you until you explain it to me."

As if afraid to say it out loud, she leaned over and whispered it into my ear.

I let out a yelp of shock. "That's what it means? Seriously? That's what Charles keeps hoping will happen? I thought you guys were all supposed to be a bunch of prudes!"

* * *

I expected another embarrassed apology from Hartley, but it was like that night in his library had never happened. Like he hadn't shattered my soul with his searing kisses. Instead he acted like everything was cool between us.

Which I guess technically it was, because as far as I could tell, we hadn't crossed any uncrossable lines. Since he seemed to be avoiding me, it at least meant I was back to looking through books with minor help from Charles.

The days passed by quicker than I'd hoped, and it was the night before James was to arrive, and we were going to that Almack's party. Charles lent me all kinds of jewelry, and I got to wear a very pretty, pastel-striped pink dress. I was excited to go, and it struck me as funny just how much I'd adjusted. I was comfortable in my skin. In my insane number of petticoats. Even the corset didn't seem so bad anymore.

My breath solidified in my throat when Hartley came downstairs. It was like he drank some handsome potion that made him get hotter by the day. I forced myself to look away, playing with the buttons on one of my gloves.

"Do you require assistance?"

The very last thing I needed was Hartley's fingers all over the exposed skin at the top of my glove.

“I’m good.” I totally wasn’t. He was too close, making my stomach hollow out. I didn’t know how long we’d be standing there, waiting for Charles. So I attempted small talk. “Are you excited for James to arrive tomorrow?” It was our one last hurrah before Hartley expected me to convince James to love me.

The smile that had been on his face faded, a bit at a time. “Obviously. He is my brother.” But he didn’t sound happy. “Am I to assume that you are excited to attend another ball?”

“Yes.” I didn’t tell him that part of the reason was that I hoped we could dance together. Charles had told me I wasn’t allowed to dance with any man more than twice, because to do so was essentially an engagement announcement. But I wanted those two dances with him.

“You’ve obviously never been to Almack’s before.” He let out a combination sigh/groan. “Would it be too presumptuous if I asked why you still want to attend balls? Especially given our history thus far?”

I hadn’t been expecting that. “I don’t know. Maybe I have a Cinderella complex.”

“You wish to become a princess? I promise you that there isn’t a royal in England I’d wish on my worst enemy.”

I couldn’t tell him that if I didn’t figure out how to get home, I wouldn’t mind becoming a countess. “It’s not really about the whole palace and tiara thing. It’s about a man loving you that much. Enough that he’d be willing to give up everything for you. Enough that he would scour his kingdom looking for you. That he would make you his wife—and yes, a princess—and that he would demand the rest of the world love you despite your background. That’s what I love about it. Silly, I know.”

“No.” There was a strange quality to his voice. “It sounds . . . rather wonderful. Too bad it exists only in fairy tales.”

“Too bad,” I echoed. Had he moved closer while I was talking? And was I ever going to get used to the little shocks of delight that I got from his proximity?

“Shall we be off?” Charles asked from the stairs, and Hartley stepped back quickly. Like maybe he wasn’t as immune to me as he pretended to be. She had Princess in her arms.

“Are you bringing your dogs?” Maybe it wasn’t too weird here? Some women in my time carried dogs around like fashion accessories.

“Do you actually believe those old harpies will let you bring an animal into their hallowed hall?” Hartley piled on, just as incredulous as me.

“I believe she hasn’t been feeling well, and I have decided to bring her along with me. She can stay in the carriage while we dance. I will feel better knowing she is nearby.” Charles said it in a voice that let me know she usually did what she wanted and nobody questioned her.

Stephens arrived with a tray and three shot glasses. “I thought we should fortify our nerves before we go,” Charles said, taking one of the glasses.

Hartley quickly downed his.

“I am super done with alcohol. No thanks,” I said.

“It’s not alcoholic. Just something to help you feel more relaxed tonight.” I almost laughed at the disgusted look Hartley had when he discovered he hadn’t just taken a shot.

It wasn’t alcohol, but there was something off about this drink. Some herbs I couldn’t identify. Maybe Charles was just into the holistic thing. Shrugging, I copied Hartley and downed it all at once.

We were handed our shawls and umbrellas and got into the carriage. Hartley asked about vouchers, and Charles showed him some papers in her reticule. Charles had been right. I was feeling more mellow.

Princess settled onto the seat next to Charles, as if she rode in carriages every day. Once her dog was settled, Charles turned to address us. “I hope you will both make an effort tonight to practice attracting members of the opposite sex. You, Emma dear, should particularly flirt. I’ve yet to see you do it, and I should observe you at least once in the wild before James arrives.”

Hartley made a sound that seemed to indicate he’d had firsthand experience with my particular brand of flirting, and I hoped my cheeks weren’t too red.

“I can’t flirt with random men,” I told her. I couldn’t even flirt with men I knew. “When I try, I just make some weird vowel sounds, and then I have to hide. I think men prefer a woman who can speak.”

“You don’t really know much about men, do you?” Hartley teased, and the lightness in his voice touched my heart in ways I did not approve of.

“And you are in no position to judge anyone else. You are incapable of flirtation as well. I have paraded girl after girl in front of you, one diamond of the first water after another, and you refuse to give any of them a second look,” Charles said, wagging her finger at him.

“That is not true. I looked twice at that Harper girl last year.”

Charles leaned over to swat Hartley in the leg with her fan. “That was because her bodice had started to slip off. That doesn’t count!”

For some reason, that was like the funniest thing I’d ever heard, and I started to giggle. Was there really not any alcohol in that drink? Maybe I shouldn’t have taken a scheming witch’s word for it.

We got to Almack’s and had to meet a bunch of stuffy, snobby, uptight “patronesses.” Fortunately, they all adored the Duchess of Warfield, so they were nice and polite to me. After we were announced and made our way to the dance floor, I grabbed Charles’s arm. “Time to ’fess up. What was in that drink?”

“Just an old family recipe. A little bit of something that is going to make men briefly desire you. Nothing permanent. It won’t affect any man related to me, because as I said, thick, impenetrable dragon hides, but tonight every other unattached man will find you irresistible.”

I stole a look around, and no lie, most of the men in the room were watching me. I was not used to that. “Why?”

“Because you’d be surprised what jealousy can drive a man to do. Particularly Hartley.”

I couldn’t help but let out a sound that was half guffaw, half disgust. “Jealousy, me, and Hartley do not belong in the same sentence.”

“Leave that to me and my magic. You enjoy yourself, and remember what you’ve learned.”

“Aren’t you supposed to be trying to get me engaged to James?” She ignored me. Well, at least now she wasn’t trying to hide it. She was finally being up-front about her plans to play matchmaker for Hartley and me. Someone approached, and Charles made the introductions, but I watched Hartley, who had drifted off from us. I wondered if his drink was going to make all the women here fall in love with him. Not that he needed it. All he had to do was flash that smile and put on that charm, and they’d all be eating out of his hand.

I wanted to eat out of his hand.

Which was both a weird and disturbing visual.

“Miss Blythe!”

I turned to see Miss Littlefield, from the family party. She was surrounded by a gaggle of girls, and she introduced me to all of them, but

there was no way I was going to remember them all. So I smiled and nodded and mentally nicknamed them Miss A, B, C and D.

Miss D asked me, “I simply adore your accent. Where are you from?”

Unfortunately for me, I had been watching Hartley work the room and reflexively answered, “I’m from Cali . . .” I stopped. There was no California yet. “Caliston. I’m from Caliston.”

Miss Littlefield looked confused. “I thought you were from Boston.”

“I am!” I assured her. “Caliston’s just kind of a nickname for Boston.”

Miss B turned to Miss Littlefield. “Did you tell her your news?” Without waiting for her to respond, Miss B blurted out, “Miss Littlefield is betrothed!”

“Things finally worked out with your Mr. Right?” I asked.

“No. If you’ll remember, I told you his name was Lord White. Not Wright.”

It was too hard to explain the phrase. “Congratulations!” The other misses all congratulated her again, and my gaze wandered back to where it most wanted to go. Back to Hartley. “Hey, who’s the hottie talking to Lord Hartley?”

“Lord Davenshire? He’s not at all haughty. He’s actually rather nice,” Miss A informed me.

Regardless of semantics, Lord Davenshire was very cute. And tall. And he was shooting me sexy little glances. Which I watched Hartley notice. And then Hartley grabbed a flask from his coat and knocked back something that made him grimace.

“And that’s Mr. Powell who has just joined them,” Miss B said with a sigh. “He promised to call on my family tomorrow. I do so hope he does.”

I nearly laughed out loud but managed not to. Some things didn’t change. Oh, the actual method and technology would, but in the twenty-first century women would still be hoping that men would call.

It was time for the dancing to begin, and Hartley, with his two companions in tow, joined our group and made the introductions, even though it seemed to pain him to do so.

Lord Davenshire was even better looking up close. He bent low over my hand. “I am especially pleased to make your acquaintance.” One of the Alphabet Girls behind me giggled, but I had to admit, he was pretty swoonworthy. “Because I had hoped to claim you for the first dance.”

I paused, waiting for Hartley to interject. Would he ask me? I wanted him to ask me.

But he didn't.

"Yes, Lord Davenshire, I would be honored to dance with you." He offered me his hand and led me out onto the dance floor. I caught a glimpse of Charles's triumphant expression and watched Hartley guzzle from his silver flask like his liver was on fire. He should have asked one of the girls we'd left behind to dance, but he didn't. Which was rude.

If Hartley was going to sulk in the corner and drink, he could have at it. The music began, and I curtsied to Lord Davenshire as he bowed to me, just before we stepped forward, circling around each other without touching.

Screw it. Even if magic had been involved, I was going to dance and have my Cinderella moment, and Hartley wasn't going to ruin it for me.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

THINGS I'M GOING TO INVENT IF I GET STUCK IN 1816

Alcoholics Anonymous

The ball seemed to consist mainly of old guys in powdered wigs (trying to score on pale young chicks), some warm lemonade, and lots of fun dancing. I had one partner after another, but Hartley never once asked me to dance. He didn't dance with anyone. Which was rude. He stood against a wall, glowering and getting progressively drunker from his flask.

At one point I asked him how he still had alcohol in it, because it was like Mary Poppins's carpetbag. "Lord Davenshire smuggled in a good deal of rum. And I've discovered that time flies when you're having rum." He lifted his flask in salute before taking another swig. "Besides, what is a ball without alcohol?"

"Still a ball, only with less vomiting later."

The Duchess of Warfield came to claim me, and I spent the rest of the evening either dancing or sitting with her and being the center of attention of almost every partygoer. No matter what anyone said, the duchess would ask my opinion on it and then beam at me like some proud parent regardless of my response. I got the feeling I could have said, "Purple pandas pop pilfered prunes," and she still would have acted like I was some sort of witty genius. She was very kind.

I danced with everyone who asked. Even when I didn't want to. But not a single partner, not a single dance, could even begin to compare to the private waltz I'd had with Hartley in his ballroom. The music slowed to an end, and my dance with the bald, fat, sweaty man across from me was finally over, and I couldn't have been more relieved. I curtsied, probably more deeply than I should have, and felt someone at my elbow. For a moment I hoped it was Hartley, but it was a servant. "He wishes to see you, miss. In the gaming room."

Before I could ask what that meant, the servant was gone. My heart sped up. It had to be Hartley. I was escorted back to Charles and the duchess,

but I quickly excused myself and headed toward one of the open doors. Charles had mentioned that there was usually a room set up for gaming, but tonight it wasn't being used. It all felt so romantic and mysterious.

But it wasn't Hartley who waited for me in the darkened room. It was George Godwin. That guy Hartley hated because of his dead fiancée.

"Ugh. Not even." I turned around to leave, not interested in anything this jerk had to say, but he was quicker than I would have imagined as he grabbed my upper arm, yanking on me hard and whirling me back toward him.

I yelped, but he clamped a hand over my mouth. "Running off before you even hear what I have to say? That's not very polite, is it?"

Not polite? I'd show him not polite. I bit down on his hand as hard as I could.

Now he was the one to yelp, jerking away and pushing me at the same time. I could taste blood in my mouth, so I was careful not to look at his hand. I couldn't afford to faint now. After a string of curse words, he said, "Who do you think you are?"

"I think I'm the girl who's going to put you in your place." And I went into full-on self-offense mode. My self-defense instructor would have been proud as I stomped on the instep of Mr. Godwin's foot and then brought my knee up, hard, in the spot where it counts.

He bent over, moaning. Then I punched him, connecting with his nose. He fell to the ground. My hand was throbbing, but it had been totally worth it. "No means no. I don't know why what's-her-face ever chose you over him. Hartley is a thousand times more of a man and a gentleman than you'll ever be."

Turning to leave, I ran into a masculine chest. For a frantic moment I worried that George Godwin had backup, and so I nearly fainted with relief when I saw it was Hartley. "Aunt Charles said it was time to go. Something about leaving them wanting more." He said it while wobbling slightly from one foot to the other. "Do you need me to take care of this situation?"

I wasn't sure Hartley could manage taking off his own boots, let alone trying to get into a fight with someone who was stupid, but still sober. "I've already handled Downton Grabby. Let's get out of here."

Hartley swayed to one side, and I reached out to help him, but he straightened up. "I'm fine. Just fine."

We went back through the ballroom; I knew Charles would have already said our goodbyes, and it wasn't long until we had retrieved our overcoats and were standing out front with Charles, waiting for the carriage to pull up. I again noticed that Hartley seemed to have a hard time standing still. "How much alcohol did you drink?"

"All of it," he replied with a wink.

Maybe it wasn't too bad if he could still make jokes. "You're going to be in big trouble once your aunt realizes how drunk you are."

"I've been in trouble since the moment I met you."

I had only a moment to ponder what that was supposed to mean before the front doors flew open and George Godwin waddled out. "I am not finished with you!" He pointed at me and started hobbling toward me.

Hartley intervened and punched him in the face before he could reach me, then let out a sigh of relief, as if he'd been waiting all night to do just that. I was about to tell him I could take care of myself when Mr. Godwin reared back and hit Hartley in the face, knocking him to the ground. "Hartley!" I gasped.

I was torn—part of me wanted to make sure he was okay, and the other part of me wanted revenge. My adrenaline demanded the second option.

Before I could react, Charles was beating on Godwin with her walking cane. "How dare you attack a man so deep in his cups? Have you no honor?"

He grabbed the walking stick and then wielded it like a sword, like he was planning on attacking Charles! I wasn't going to let that happen. I tapped him on the shoulder, and when he spun around, I kicked him in the same spot as earlier. He might never have children, but that was not my problem. He dropped the cane and with a loud moan fell to the ground near the front steps. George Godwin had a murderous look in his eyes, but the arrival of our carriage and all those male servants who ran over to the sidewalk to assist us seemed to deter him.

I knelt down next to Hartley, who smiled up at me. "I thought I did rather well in that fight."

"Yep. I saw the way your face hit his fist. Come on." Along with a couple of footmen, we helped him get back up on his feet while Godwin snuck back inside. There was some discussion among Hartley's servants about what had just happened to their lord, but I was focused on making sure that Hartley was all right.

Charles had gone over to our ride and returned with a concerned expression. “It appears that Princess has fallen ill and regurgitated her dinner all over the inside of the carriage. I will travel home with her, and there will be another carriage along shortly to take you back.”

She was going to ride home in the Vomit Comet? She was a better woman than I. Hartley only barely stayed upright. I wondered how hard he had hit his head. I must have said out loud the unkind things I was thinking about what Godwin deserved.

Charles laid one hand on my forearm. “You’ve no need to worry about Mr. Godwin receiving his due. One of the tigers located his carriage and made some adjustments to the straps. One good pull by his team and they will all break.”

The thought of him being stranded made me want to laugh, but Charles looked very serious. “And what, you disapprove?” I asked.

She peered down her nose at me. “Disapprove? Good heavens, no. Who do you think gave Jeremy the knife and the idea? I will see you at home.”

Then I did laugh. I couldn’t help it. Even if Hartley was leaning against me like I was a brick wall. Charles waved to me with Princess in her lap, who looked suspiciously fine. The supposedly sick dog barked once at me, her tail wagging.

As promised, another carriage showed up to take us home. I climbed in, having to help Hartley get in. I was totally out of breath by the time it was over. I had wanted to tell Hartley about what Charles had done, but I realized that he was passed out, leaning against the interior wall. He looked adorable. Sleep erased all the hardness and cynicism from his face, and he looked . . . sweet. Beautiful. Right up until he let out a loud snore, which shattered the whole effect and made me giggle.

It wasn’t too long before we were back home. The driver helped me get Hartley up to the door, and I had to open it myself. Which was surprising, especially given that I’d never done it before. Charles didn’t have that much of a head start on us. Where was everyone? Hartley was still propped against me like some kind of life-size Ken doll.

Usually I couldn’t swing a dead cat without hitting a footman, but the mansion felt deserted. What was going on? I called out for Stephens. Tommy or Jamie. There was no response. Only silence. Looked like it was all up to me. “Come on, Sir Drinks-A-Lot. Let’s get you upstairs.”

He was unbelievably heavy, and I wasn't strong enough to support him. I nudged him with my elbow, hoping he would shift some of his weight. "You're too old to be this drunk," I told him. "I thought people outgrew this once they got out of college."

"Every man at the ball was flirting with you," he growled, as if that explained it. "And you were flirting and dancing with them."

Was Hartley *jealous*? Was that why he'd gotten so hammered? My heart beat unsteadily at this new tidbit of information. He was being so honest it felt like I should return the favor. "That was only to make you a little crazy."

"Behold your success." He suddenly grabbed me and twirled me around. "Would you like to dance, Emma?"

Some part of my brain registered that he was calling me Emma instead of Miss Blythe. It had only taken him getting fall-down drunk for that to happen. "No, I wouldn't like to dance. What I would like is to get you into bed."

He pulled me close against him, holding me in place. "I have no objection to that, my darling girl."

My pulse flailed wildly at his implication, and I had to put some distance between us. I shrugged off his arms and stepped back. "No, I meant . . . never mind. You're too drunk to understand."

The look in his eyes was predatory, intense. "A man is never too drunk to understand that."

His words made me shiver and my stomach do flip-flops, but I decided to ignore it. With a loud sigh, I shrugged off my coat, leaving it on a table. I walked behind Hartley and helped tug his off, too. "Come on."

He put an arm around my shoulder as we went upstairs, but it didn't seem like it was entirely necessary. He probably could have gone up under his own steam but for some reason didn't want to. I didn't complain, as I liked being this close to him. "You called me Emma earlier. I thought you weren't allowed to call me Emma."

"I'm not." He took in a deep breath, and for a moment I wondered if he'd been smelling me. "Emma."

The sound of my name on his lips did weird things to me. I had wanted it for so long, and here he was, finally saying it. And it was sending little thrills of delight all through me.

“Are you trying to provoke me?” It was the only logical explanation I could come up with.

“I do like provoking you. I like discovering what unexpected thing you’ll say next.”

He had to show me which room was his, and I realized it wasn’t actually all that far away from mine. I opened the door, and we nearly fell inside, with him adjusting his weight at the last moment to prevent that from happening. I helped him over to his bed, where he sat down with a sigh.

“Don’t you have some guy who like lives in your closet and helps you get undressed?” I looked around, hoping he would appear.

“My valet? Yes. I have a valet.” I liked the way he said the word, pronouncing the *T* at the end.

I pulled on the bell, hoping said valet, whose existence had been verified, would show up soon. We waited a few minutes in silence. Even if all the servants had mysteriously disappeared, at least someone had made sure to set a roaring fire in Hartley’s room. I tapped my foot impatiently. Rosemary never took this long to respond.

“Then where is he?”

“Haven’t the foggiest. I suppose you will have to assist me.”

My own clothes were so binding, I had to imagine his weren’t much better. But I was helping only with safe outer-layer stuff. Like his coat. And his boots. They looked especially tight. I grabbed at one of his feet and pulled, and the boot slowly came loose until it popped off, causing me to fall on my butt. Hartley laughed, and I was both annoyed by and delighted at the sound.

I got off the other boot since I was already on the ground and stood up to help him with his coat. All the time I’d been complaining about my corset, and I literally had to peel the coat off him. He let out a deep breath when I got it off. I could relate.

Considering my job finished, I was about to tell him good night, because I was not supposed to be in his room, and if his valet ever did show up, this might qualify as me being compromised. No big deal in my time, reason to get married in his.

He started fumbling with his cravat, and I took pity on him. I sat down on his bed, facing him, and tried to undo the complicated knots. If I’d been aware of the intimacy of this situation before, it was nothing like what I

was experiencing now. Sitting on his bed, my fingers at his throat. The firelight lovingly bathed his profile, and it was all I could do not to stare.

And touch.

My fingers were shaking. I wondered if he noticed.

Then he spoke, and I almost jumped. “Do you know how un-bloody-hinged I am around you?”

I knew how un-bloody-hinged he made me. But I could only squeak out, “What?”

His eyes were blue flames, intense, ablaze like a wildfire. “Do you not know how much I admire you? Your quick mind, your wit, your nonsensical words that make me wonder what you will say next . . .” His words trailed off as he reached up to touch the side of my face. Which made my whole body sigh. “The way you delight in everything and everyone, as if it is all new to you.”

He was so, so drunk. If they had Alcoholics Anonymous in this century, I would have made him go to a meeting. Because he was obviously out of his mind and saying things he didn’t mean. Things he couldn’t mean.

“You surprise me, and I’m not often surprised.” His palm was warm and wonderful against my cheek.

“Don’t,” I said, finding it suddenly hard to swallow. “Don’t talk like that.”

He took his hand away, his face questioning. “Like what?”

I couldn’t keep touching him. I let my own hands fall back into my lap. “Like . . . that. Saying stuff like that. It’s my personal kryptonite.”

Hartley knit his eyebrows together, adorably confused.

“It makes me too weak to fight. Too weak to resist,” I explained.

Somehow, he managed to move even closer to me. “Then don’t fight. Don’t resist.”

My mouth went dry. Did he have any idea what he was saying?

And who he was saying it to?

“Boy, you can be charming when you want to be,” I said with a shaky laugh. I’d have to be a total sucker to fall for it.

Guess what? Huge sucker, right here.

He reached up to undo his cravat, and I watched as his long fingers undid the white cloth in a few quick movements. He pulled the long white linen free and set it on the bed between us. It was then that I noticed the damage to his knuckles.

Somehow they'd been scraped up. "Your poor hands!" I said. They should be cleaned so that they wouldn't get infected. I grabbed his cravat and carried it over to the water bowl, getting part of it wet.

"Are you going to faint?" he asked when I sat back down, much farther away from him. I tried not to think about the way he emanated warmth as I held one of his big hands in my lap, cleaning it.

"That's only fresh blood. I'm okay with dried blood." It wasn't lost on me that he'd been hurt because he was trying to protect me. "I've never had anybody defend my honor before. That was very cool."

"Cool?" he repeated.

"Nice. Heroic." I dabbed carefully at his hand. "Very romantic."

I hadn't meant to say the last part out loud, but his self-satisfied grin let me know he'd heard me. His hands were fine. I let the dirty linen fall to the floor. "I should probably go. You know, before we have to get married or something."

He edged closer to me. "Unless you'd prefer to do something else. You know, you've been here with me, alone in my room, and haven't once tried to take advantage of me. I feel as if I ought to be offended."

I wanted to both laugh and kiss him. "Seeing as how you didn't take advantage of me when I was drunk, I don't think I should take advantage of you now."

"Even if I want you to take advantage of me?"

I sucked in a deep breath, trying to keep my head clear and ignore the warmth pooling inside me. "Especially if you want me to take advantage of you."

"You're an excellent nurse, Emma."

His abrupt change of subject and use of my name did nothing to ease the physical wanting I felt. "Thanks."

"But there is one part of me that still aches that you have not tended to."

My throat had closed in on itself as my imagination ran wild. "Oh?" I started scooting back, but he kept moving slowly toward me. My back hit his headboard, trapping me. He was so close, and my heart thudded so hard I worried it might explode.

"I should go," I whispered.

"Yes, you should," he agreed, right before he leaned in to start nuzzling my neck. My eyes rolled back in my head, and I grabbed onto his shoulders for support.

“I’m serious,” I said, in between little bolts of pleasure. “I shouldn’t be here . . . in your room . . . on your bed.”

Now his fingers were doing amazing things to the back of my neck. “My darling Emma, you have been in my bed every night since you first arrived.” He said the words against my skin, and I wanted to combust.

What in the world did you say to that?

Then he straightened up, letting go of me. The loss of his touch made me want to collapse like a rag doll. “You should go, because I can only think of one thing when I see you here.”

“Sleeping?” I asked weakly, already knowing that wasn’t the answer.

A slow, lazy, seductive smile crept across his face. “No. Not sleeping.”

Now everything inside me was on fire. Like the room temperature had suddenly gone up to ten thousand degrees. “You’re, uh, sitting really close to me.” I didn’t know what was wrong with my brain that it felt compelled to say obvious and stupid things to him.

“I’m afraid the situation requires it.”

“What situation?” I had turned into some kind of simpleminded, lust-fueled idiot who, because I couldn’t process what was going on, just kept asking dumb questions.

“The one where I am going to kiss you.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

THINGS I'M GOING TO INVENT IF I GET STUCK IN 1816

Smartphones, so I can design an app that reminds me not to do stupid things.

I somehow managed to be both completely alarmed and totally excited. I seemed to spend most of my free time imagining kissing him again, even though reality tried to remind me about our situation. And how none of this could possibly work out.

But the rest of me did not care. He reached up and started taking out pins from my hair, letting them drop. My breathing hitched as I felt my hair hit my shoulders, and then his fingers were in it, massaging the back of my neck. It was like each individual hair follicle was a live wire, sending sparks along my veins.

"Better." His voice was rough with something—longing? Desire? Whatever it was, I was feeling it, too.

I knew I should stop him. He was doing this only because of his current state of hillbilly-level inebriation. I had wanted him, wanted this, for so long that I didn't move. I just let him keep touching me, and my skin burned underneath his hands.

Then he was impossibly close, and my heart fluttered hard, like a hummingbird trapped in a cage.

"Do you know how much I have come to love the smell of orange blossoms?" He murmured the words near my cheek, not quite making contact. For one heart-stopping second, I had actually thought he was going to say he loved me. But he just loved my soap. Which I was okay with, because I was pretty fond of his scent, too.

It took me a second to figure out what he was doing. Because while I had been expecting his promised kiss, instead he ghosted his lips over my neck, along my jawline, up over my cheeks, across my closed eyelids, up to my forehead. It was like he was kissing me without actually touching me.

Hartley was giving me the opportunity to say no. He was letting me stop him. Giving me the chance to go.

Problem was, even if my brain agreed that was the most logical thing to do, especially after I'd told him I wouldn't take advantage of him, my body had totally taken over, and none of the rest of me had a say in the matter.

He drew back, and I forced my eyes open. He held my face in his hands, looking at me like I was something wonderful and precious, and surprisingly it made tears blur my vision. It was so unexpected. His thumbs stroked my cheeks, and I swallowed several times in response to the sensation.

The wanting I felt for him pulsed through my blood, making it impossible to turn back. What little space that still existed between us had become electric and heated, making it so I couldn't breathe, couldn't resist. It was like I had no control at all over my own limbs.

He moved his head slowly toward me, and a giddy, bubbly excitement fizzed up inside me, but he didn't kiss me. Not on my lips, anyway. Instead he was alternating between leaving soft little kisses on my cheek and brushing his mouth against my skin. My cheeks were super sensitized, and everywhere he touched left little tremors in his wake.

There had been no actual meeting of lips yet, but I had already gone limp like a rag doll, hanging on to him for dear life. If his plan was to seduce me, I was getting the distinct feeling he might end up successful in the attempt.

He moved from my cheek toward my earlobe and the sensitive skin on my neck. He was so close to me now, that as he drew in ragged breaths, I could feel his chest expand against me. I placed a hand on him, and his heartbeat matched my own frantic one.

When he nipped at the bottom of my ear, whatever was still keeping me upright gave out, and I had to cling to him, wrapping my arms around his neck, letting my fingers play with the ends of his silky hair.

"Emma," he whispered, saying my name like I was some kind of goddess that he was begging a favor from. His mouth was against my throat now, and the feeling whipped through me like lightning. Heat radiated out in concentric circles from everywhere he nuzzled me—my jaw, the exposed part of my shoulder, at the pulse point in my throat.

Then he was looking at me again, and my fuzzy brain demanded to know why he had stopped. He was studying my mouth, and then he began to run his thumb across it. I parted my lips slightly at his touch.

"I never did tell you what part of me still ached," he said in a low voice.

"No, you didn't." The fact that I could still speak seemed like a complete miracle.

"My lips."

There was the possibility that he had planned to say more, but I'd had enough of his particular brand of delicious torture. My lips ached, too.

And they were done waiting.

When his mouth crashed against mine, like two asteroids colliding against each other, that hummingbird feeling in my heart intensified a thousandfold. And it spread out everywhere, making my skin shiver with the same flappy, electric sensation.

All my senses exploded as his warm, strong mouth met mine, demanding and taking, but giving and soothing all at the same time. It was like every other kiss in my entire life had been wrong, and I was only just now realizing how kissing was supposed to work.

And who I was supposed to be kissing.

Hartley.

Only Hartley.

His hands were on my back, pulling me toward him, and I went. I still had to keep my arms wrapped around him tightly, because otherwise I would have slid off the bed and collapsed into a heap. My muscles twitched in response to his touch but were not willing to contribute to keeping me vertical.

Our heads moved from side to side as if he couldn't find the best way to kiss me and had to keep searching for a way to get us closer, to feel more.

Shimmery endorphins lit up my brain, making everything feel even more amazing. I thought I might be getting a kissing high. If a kissing high was anything like a runner's high, I suddenly understood why most of the girls in my freshman dorm went running every day at five in the morning. If I'd known, I would have joined them.

The kiss had started out explosive, and we never slowed down. Where before there had been boundaries and lines not crossed, now neither one of us was holding anything back. There was no caution, no hesitation. Just sensation and longing and the desperate need for more. I was in the middle

of crawling into his lap when he suddenly stopped. It was like somebody had ripped off my right hand. As if part of me had gone missing.

“Are you not afraid?” he asked, his voice harsh and out of breath.

“Of what?” I asked, my tone matching his.

“The storm,” he said. It was then that I realized a massive storm raged outside, lighting up his bedroom windows with lightning every few seconds. Rolls of thunder made everything shake. I should have been terrified. I wasn’t.

“I didn’t even hear it,” I said, taking the opportunity to run my fingertips over his five-o’clock shadow. “Because there’s only you.”

Something flashed in his eyes that I didn’t understand, and then he was kissing me again. Hard. Driving. Intense. We were caught up in a storm of a different kind, and I had to rely on him to keep me anchored. What I had said was true. I couldn’t hear the storm.

There was only Hartley and his feverish kiss.

Every touch, every sensation, everything between us was fierce and hot and consuming. Like I’d dived headfirst into an erupting volcano. He tasted me, explored me, and I did the same. And even though it seemed impossible to get closer, we did. We were wound up in each other, like all the necklaces in my jewelry box back home.

When I thought I’d reached the threshold of what I could feel, what I could take, we surpassed it. His kisses became hungrier, more intoxicating, more demanding. Wild. Frantic. Like we were using our lips to break down all the barriers and boundaries between us, every reason we couldn’t and shouldn’t be together, all gone with the movements of our mouths and hands.

My blood felt thick, my pulse out of control. My entire body had gone so tight, so coiled up, like at any moment it would shatter from the tension he was creating. It was all rioting sensation and unbelievable pleasure and gasping breaths and passionate touches and earth-shattering kisses.

Somebody should have told me kissing could be like this. Like liquid fire that could light up your soul.

And it wasn’t enough. I wanted more. I needed more.

Apparently, so did he. He moved his mouth away from mine, tasting the skin at the base of my throat, running his fingers against my neck. I leaned my head back while digging my fingers into his shoulders. It was all so

perfect. Everything was perfect and fantastic and the best thing I'd ever felt.

Then his fingers were against my collarbone, leaving little eddies and whirlpools of molten fire. His hand moved slowly, the fire still following, and a moment later he touched my . . .

I gasped, shooting off the bed like a bullet out of a chamber.

Some reflex kicked in, and I gave him a totally soap opera–worthy slap across the face. I put both of my hands over my mouth, immediately horrified by what I had done. I couldn't believe that I had just smacked him.

His head hung down, as if he couldn't meet my gaze.

"Hartley, I'm so sorry, I didn't mean to . . ."

"Go." His voice was rough and hoarse. "Run back to your room. Before I convince you to stay."

Humiliated by all my behavior, I did as he said, running back to the safety of my own room, locking the door behind me. I didn't know when the tears had started. I wiped them with the back of my hand as I leaned against the door, my chest heaving. I was on the verge of totally breaking down.

Nothing between us had changed. Not our circumstances, not what he wanted, not what I wanted.

I heard a quiet growl and turned to see Sir Reginald perched on the top of my desk. Even in the dim firelight I saw new scratches on the drawer. I tested it, but it was still locked. More of Mrs. Farnsworth trying to discover my secrets. I needed to head her off at the pass. I had to tell Hartley before she did. Even if he would think I was crazy.

The thing was, I wanted to tell him. I wanted to share this part of myself with him. I wanted him to know everything. I sank down onto my bed as I realized why I wanted to confess. It had nothing to do with Mrs. Farnsworth.

It was because I was totally and completely in love with him. I loved Hartley. And he . . . was drunk. All of that making out had happened because he drank too much. Not because he loved me back. Not because he didn't want to live without me.

But because he was doing his best Captain Jack Sparrow impersonation and had drunk all the rum in London.

I had been so stupid, so totally caught up, that I had convinced myself none of the rest of it mattered. Like desiring me was the same as loving me.

It wasn't, and I'd been an idiot to have hoped that it was.

And I had no idea how I was going to face him in the morning.

Obviously, I didn't sleep much. I just kept running the details of that kiss through my mind over and over again. It was as if I could feel the phantom pressure of his mouth against mine, of being wrapped up in his arms. Almost as if he were there with me.

Then I'd relive my own stupidity, my own pathetic desperation and wants that made me forget where I was and how this was going to end.

There was some small, whispering voice that kept reminding me I hadn't been totally honest with Hartley. That while he was telling me about his dead girlfriend and parents, about the things he'd suffered and gone through, I was always lying to him. Always.

Even if what I told him was partially true, it was still mostly a lie.

I knew him. I loved him. I loved his loyalty, his steadfastness, his humor, the way he protected me and made me feel safe, how smart he was, his amazing family, how he was an actual man. Not a boy pretending to be a man, but a real, grown-up, mature man. Who looked out for me. Took care of me without a second thought. Was generous and kind underneath his prickly exterior. Who got so jealous of other men flirting with me that he had gotten thoroughly smashed.

But had I really given him a chance to love me? Had I ever shown him my real, twenty-first century self? Explained to him why I didn't know the rules and how completely different our worlds were? I hadn't let him in.

Maybe it was time to do that.

Sir Reginald woke me just after dawn, growling at me. He'd never made that sound before. He had always been a mostly silent specter of doom. I briefly wondered what he wanted. Deciding to just get up, I walked him over to my bedroom door, and he darted out when I opened it. I pulled on the servant's bell. When Rosemary arrived, I was grateful that she didn't say anything about the bags under my eyes.

Charles would have breakfast in her room, and I was supposed to have breakfast with Hartley downstairs in the dining room. Just like I did every morning.

How was I supposed to sit across from him? Would I get the apologizing Hartley or the let's-pretend-this-never-happened Hartley? Truth be told I was a little tired of both of them. I didn't need the reminder that he wasn't interested in being with me. He was obviously attracted to me. He couldn't deny that anymore. I had been there and felt it. There was no question.

But he still wanted me to marry his brother. His brother who was arriving today. I didn't know how fast marriages could happen here, and I still didn't have a way back to my own century. And I was running out of time to make that happen.

Another sound at my door. Rosemary opened it to see Stephens on the other side. "Lord Hartley wishes to speak with you, Miss Blythe."

I put a hand over my corseted stomach. It felt like I was at the top of a really high roller coaster in that moment just before you plummeted down to the bottom.

Whatever he had to say, I hoped I was ready to hear it. I needed to stop letting him distract me. I needed to find a way home and forget all this kissing-boys nonsense.

My only fear was that it would be easier said than done.

* * *

Hartley's throat tightened when Emma walked into the study. She wore a beautiful pale-yellow dress, which made her hair look even darker and more lustrous than usual, her fair skin gleaming in the early morning sunlight. Even from here, he could smell that orange blossom/vanilla combination that threatened to drive him completely mad.

He had hoped sobering up this morning would have returned what little sanity he still retained. That he would be able to keep her at arm's length. Not respond to her.

Not still want her.

He had been sorely mistaken.

Stephens closed the door, and Hartley couldn't help but grimace. "Does your head hurt?" she asked.

He nodded, trying to ignore the throbbing sensation inside his skull. He didn't know whether the pulsing was from having too much to drink the night before or her proximity.

"I know something that helps with hangovers. Don't drink so much."

That made him smile. He didn’t deserve her kindness or good humor after his behavior in his room.

But before he could say as much, she spoke again. “I want to say I’m sorry. I’ve never hit anyone before . . .”

He held up his hand, signaling her to stop. “I am the one who should be making sincere apologies to you, Miss Blythe. You are a guest in my home, under my protection, and I’m afraid that I have used you poorly. I am ashamed of myself and my behavior, and I beg your forgiveness for the lines that I crossed last night.”

She looked crestfallen, as if he’d said something amiss. She sank down into one of the chairs, looking down at the hands in her lap. He moved to sit in the chair next to her. It made him ill when he remembered what they had done. Not because he hadn’t enjoyed it, but because he had enjoyed it too much. Because he’d had every intention of carrying on. It was only Emma’s good sense that had stopped him from breaking every code of honor and chivalry he held dear. She was innocent, intended for another, and he had behaved like the worst kind of reprobate.

Wishing he could comfort her but knowing he should not, Hartley crossed his arms, determined to keep his hands to himself. Even if they had stopped, he could not undo what had been done. There were consequences for his actions, and he was ready to face them.

“You were well within your rights to use whatever means necessary to stop me,” he told her, not sure what particular piece of their situation was making her so unhappy. Had he frightened her? Did she think differently of him now? He found the idea that Emma would hold him in a low regard upset him. More than he might have expected it to. He, inexplicably, wanted to stay in her good graces, even if he did not deserve it.

She nodded in response to his assurance, still not meeting his gaze. It took all his self-control not to reach for her, not to do everything within his power to make her smile again.

All that was left was for him to make things right.

“As I am begging for your forgiveness, there is something else I must do.” He moved from the chair to kneel on the floor in front of her. That made her look up, her beautiful green eyes wide and shocked. “Miss Blythe, will you do me the great honor of becoming my wife?”

Emma blinked several times, seemingly overcome. With joy? With shock? Was that disbelief? Hadn’t she been expecting this?

And why was his own heart beating so rapidly? How had his palms gone damp like some green schoolboy? Why was his throat catching on each breath? He had looked on this as a matter of what was required of him as a gentleman and a lord. He knew that he must marry her, but he also knew that he would not love her. There would be obvious benefits to taking her as his bride, and they would have affection and respect. What more could a man reasonably expect? But still, kneeling here, waiting for her response, he found there was something else. Something he hadn't counted on.

He might have told himself that this would be little more than a mutually beneficial arrangement, but his physical response to her quiet showed him that he felt more for Emma than he would admit.

She stayed silent for so long that Hartley was about to repeat his proposal. Perhaps she hadn't heard?

"Why are you asking me to marry you?"

Was it not bloody obvious why? He wanted to sigh in exasperation but refrained. "Because of what passed between us last night. I must ask you to marry me."

Apparently, that had been the wrong thing to say. Her expression turned from confused to angry. She blinked several times, and he would have sworn she was counting before she answered. "So because we made out and you tried to . . . you know . . . do other stuff, now you *have* to marry me? Am I understanding that right?"

That seemed to be the long and short of it. "Yes. Recompense must be made."

"Oh. Then my answer is no."

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

THINGS I'M GOING TO INVENT IF I GET STUCK IN 1816

The science of psychology so that I can figure men out. One man, in particular.

"No?" Had he heard her correctly? "Did you just say no? To me?"

"Did I stutter?" she shot back, her eyes flashing in an entirely too-appealing way. "Pretty sure I didn't. You guys don't do anything halfway, do you? All the men I've ever met think commitment is a four-letter word."

He rocked back to sit on his heels, both stunned and confused. "I'm fairly certain commitment is not a four-letter word anywhere. Regardless, we must wed."

"No, we mustn't. I don't have to marry you if I don't want to. And I don't want to marry you because of your guilty conscience." She let out a short peal of laughter. "I mean, where I'm from, there wouldn't be a single unmarried guy over the age of fifteen if we had the same rules as you."

It was too late to tell her that it was about more than just honor or doing the right thing. He had been dreading asking her all morning, but now that she had refused him, he realized he had desperately wanted her to say yes.

Wanting to sort out his feelings in private later, he stood, bowing to her slightly. "I do apologize if my proposal has caused you further upset. I only wished to . . ."

Emma rolled her eyes. "Please stop apologizing. You didn't do anything wrong, and I didn't do anything wrong. I mean, isn't this all about reputations or whatever? Nobody knows besides us what happened, and as long as we both keep quiet, we're good." She leaned her head to one side, observing him. As if she saw things in him that no one else did. "Hasn't a woman ever told you no before? You're acting like a wounded puppy."

He straightened his shoulders. He was doing no such thing.

Or was he?

“You may very well be the only woman in England not interested in marrying me.” Even as the words came out of his mouth, he realized how arrogant and snobbish he sounded. But she was right, he did want to lick his wounds and bruised pride.

She laughed, which made him furrow his brows at her. “Oh yes. With your charming personality and positive attitude toward women in general, I’m surprised they don’t cling to your boots when you walk down the street.” She paused. “That was sarcasm, by the way. You have sarcasm here, right?”

“We have sarcasm,” he responded, clenching his teeth tight. He was getting worked up when he should not. He was an earl, not a child. He let out a sigh, running one hand through his hair. “I do not wish to fight with you. I wish only to reach an agreement.”

“But we already have an agreement. I’m supposed to marry your brother. Unless you have a reason I shouldn’t.”

Hartley could think of a million reasons why she shouldn’t marry James. Because James didn’t deserve her. Because she should marry a man who would truly appreciate her and take care of her. Because he didn’t want her vibrant spirit and joie de vivre to be ignored. Because he didn’t want her to leave his home and his life.

Because he was dangerously close to falling in love with Miss Emma Blythe and wanted her all for himself.

The shocking realization rendered him unable to speak. Unable to give her the response that he should give her. That of course she should marry James.

Even if that was not what he wanted.

But should he confess such a thing to her? What if she did not hold him in the same regard?

And if he let himself love her, what would he do if something happened to her? He could not and would not lose another woman he loved. He did not know if he could bear it.

It was better to remember himself. To remember his position, his oath, what society expected of him. What he expected of himself.

Better to keep his heart safe.

“Look, before you answer, can you wait here a second? There’s some stuff I want to show you.”

She left him to his disturbing and overwhelming thoughts and feelings. He hadn't allowed himself to care about anyone since Libby, but somehow Emma had sneaked in. She had laid siege to the stone wall around his heart, turning it to rubble, leaving him defenseless. He had to reassemble it and keep her at bay.

Emma reentered the room, carrying something bright and metallic in her hands. "I have to tell you something, and you're not going to believe me. But I'm not crazy, and I can prove it."

She came closer, still speaking. "You should probably sit."

There was something in her voice that encouraged him to do as she asked. He had never seen her looking so anxious, so apprehensive.

"I . . . uh . . . that is . . . I mean, I should . . . I . . . I'm not very good at this."

"At constructing full sentences?" he asked. What was she driving at? "Begin at the beginning."

"You said to me once that I could trust you. That I could always rely on you."

He leaned toward her, wondering where this was going. "And that is true. With the possible exception of when I've taken total leave of my senses."

Although he had not meant to tease her, he was glad that he had when she gave him a small smile. "Speaking of, you probably shouldn't drink like that again."

"Upon my word of honor, I promise you that it will never happen again." Even if it meant pouring every drop of alcohol in England into the Thames. He could not afford to lose control with her.

Emma nodded, distracted. "I'm telling you this because I realized last night that I could trust you."

That seemed to be rather ironic considering that he had behaved completely untrustworthily last night. She blushed, as if she realized what she had said. "I mean, after. When I went back to my room I thought about how you've confided in me and trusted me, but I haven't done the same with you. I want you to know that I trust you. And that I want to show you just how much I do trust you."

For some inexplicable reason, her assurance that she trusted him filled him with a warmth that started in the general vicinity of his heart.

Before he had time to ponder on what that feeling meant, she continued on. “And we’re friends, right?”

Were they? Friends? It seemed an odd way to consider her.

“So if I’m going to begin at the beginning, in the immortal words of Snoopy, it was a dark and stormy night.”

“Snoopy?” he echoed.

“He’s a dog.”

“There’s a talking dog involved?”

“What? No.” She sounded exasperated. He understood that feeling all too well. “I was trying to set the mood. Okay, um, I’m not from here.”

“I am aware,” he said, sensing something very important was about to happen and not wanting to frighten her off before she said what she needed to.

“No. I don’t mean I’m not from England.” She sucked in a deep breath. “I’m not from 1816.”

Not from 1816? “What do you mean?”

“I was born in 1996. In the year 2017, I was working in your home, which will become a museum. One night I snuck into what is currently my room, and there was a piece of paper with writing on it that I read out loud during an awful storm. The next morning I woke up here. In your home, with you, in 1816. Two hundred years in the past. I am from the future.”

He blinked several times. Was she serious?

She seemed very serious. “This is a cell phone. It’s really hard to explain everything that it does, but one of the things I can do is take pictures. Can you hold that newspaper on your desk next to your face?”

While incredulous, after a moment’s hesitation he did as she asked. The rectangle in her hand flashed a light at him briefly, startling him. She brought it over and showed it to him. There, he saw himself. Holding today’s newspaper. She had somehow captured his image with perfect clarity. Astounded, he reached for the object she called a cell phone, but she held on to it.

“How is this done?”

“No idea. Not a scientist or an engineer.” She came over, putting her head close to his, and used the cell phone again. This time she showed him an image of the two of them together. “It’s not magic. It’s science. Twenty-first century science.”

Then she let him hold it. It was so light and fit easily into his hand. She did something with her finger, showing him pictures. “This is my best friend, Bex. She’s British. We met here in London. Here’s some pictures of Big Ben and the Tower, and you can see streets and cars. That’s how we get around. We don’t use horses. And here’s pictures of me on my flight. In an airplane. We have big machines with wings that fly us across the ocean.”

Emma took the phone once again. “I use my cell phone to call other people. You can speak to someone, and they answer on their phone, and we can have conversations. Or send texts. Which are like instant, short letters.” She showed him another screen with writing encased in elongated circles. “I also use it for music.”

Another movement with her finger, and a loud thumping noise filled the room. “Oh, not hip-hop. Let’s start you out with something easy. Like the classics.” Then he heard, to his great astonishment, Beethoven’s Symphony no. 5. As if she held an entire orchestra within the palm of her hand.

“Astonishing,” was all he could muster.

She went on to explain several other uses for her cell phone, showing them to him, and each new piece of information shocked him more than the last. To have such power, such knowledge, at your fingertips at all times. It was simply unbelievable. Unfathomable.

“I think I should probably sit down,” he said ten minutes later.

“You are sitting down,” she reminded him with a mischievous grin.

“Oh yes. Quite right. It’s just . . .”

“Don’t worry. I get it. It’s a lot to take in. And this is my Mickey Mouse watch. A lot of people don’t wear watches anymore because your cell phone has the time, but it was my mom’s, and I like wearing it.” She handed him a timepiece. This at least felt familiar, even if it was impossibly small and attached to a leather band. “I don’t have to wind it. It runs on a battery. If you want, you can take the back off and look inside. Just don’t, you know, ruin it.”

Not have to wind it?

“So since we’re having actual sunshine today, I’m going to go out into the garden. You come and find me when you’re ready to talk. When you’re done messing with my phone, here’s how you turn it off. I want to conserve the battery on it.” She showed him an extremely slim button on the side of the object, and words magically appeared. Emma told him to

choose the “Power Off” option. She also showed him how to do something she called “scrolling” by moving his finger from one side to the other along the face. “Don’t forget to turn it off.”

With that last reminder, she left.

Left him after completely shattering everything he thought he knew about her.

The cell phone seemed far too intimidating. After scrolling a few times and looking at the things it contained, including a moving cartoon that involved furious birds and their porcine tormentors, he shut it off as she had instructed. He picked up her timepiece, or what she had called a wristwatch, and began to study it. A drawing of a partially dressed rodent smiled back at him, and the rodent’s hands served to keep the minute and the hour. He turned it over.

The seams on the back were too perfect, too flawless. One could hardly tell where to open it, as she had offered. He took the quizzing glass from his top drawer and a letter opener to pry off the back. The words “Made in China” were engraved on it. How very odd. It didn’t appear at all Chinese in design.

Then he held his glass over the innards of the timepiece. In addition to the ingenuity of the band that made it wearable, the insides were far too tiny. As if elves had cobbled it together. It looked nothing at all like his own pocket watch in either design or size. He wondered if the round circle near the bottom was the—what had she called it? Oh yes, the battery that powered the wristwatch.

He also had no explanation at all for the pale-green phosphorescent light that illuminated the face when he pushed one of the side buttons. He swore and dropped the watch on his desk. The ramifications of her proclamation were mind-boggling. He had all the basic questions. Why. How. What. They didn’t even begin to cover it. It made his head hurt worse.

Standing up, he went to look out of the window nearest to his desk, which faced the garden. He had a glimpse of Emma’s skirts before she headed behind a tall bush. She had proclaimed them friends. He’d only ever thought of his schoolmates as his friends. Even then, there were few relationships he’d kept up, especially since Libby’s death. At the moment, he didn’t think there was anyone he would currently consider a friend.

With the singular exception of Emma. She was right. They were friends. Which meant he had to trust her. Believe her.

Even if it seemed beyond impossible. How could she be from the future?

And yet, how could he not believe her when all the evidence currently sat in pieces on his desk?

If she truly were from the future, it would certainly explain all of her queer sayings and expressions and her utter lack of social grace and manners. The way she'd known how to save the Duke and Duchess of Warfield's daughter. Her odd notions about women's equality to men. The joy she took in every experience. Because they were all new experiences. They were things she was unfamiliar with. How had he never worked this out before?

Some very small part of him thought of the possibility that she was simply delusional. But even as he thought it, he knew it to be untrue. She was quite sane. Strange, but sane.

And she possessed objects he could not explain or rationalize away.

Not to mention that he knew, better than anyone, how such a thing could be possible.

No, Emma was not insane and was not lying. What she said was true. Which meant she was not Professor Blythe's daughter.

He blinked several times as this realization set in. What had happened to the real Miss Blythe?

* * *

On my way outside, I ran into a very smug Charles. And everything fell into place. "Your dog never threw up, did she?"

How had she managed to keep all the servants away? Magic? Bribes?

Witches, man. Manipulative, sneaky witches.

"And?" She wasn't even ashamed or embarrassed.

"And . . ." Part of me wanted to lie to her. To not give her the satisfaction of finding out that her plan had almost worked. Not to mention that I'd just told Hartley we had to keep this on the down-low. But it was like the words just spilled out of my mouth. "Your little scheme worked. He just proposed to me."

"Oh, my dearest Emma!" She ran over, grabbing both of my hands. "I had so hoped—"

“I said no.” I had to cut her off before she went too far down that road. Especially since I wanted to travel down it with her and jump around like a giddy teenager. She looked so disappointed I almost wished I could take it back.

“But why would you say no? You and Hartley are perfect together, and it’s quite obvious that the two of you care about each other. I’m not certain I understand what the problem is.”

“I’m not going to marry him only because he feels bad about kissing me.” What I did not say was that if there had been another reason, if he had asked me because he had feelings for me, my answer might have been different.

That I might have been willing to give up everything and stay here with him, if he wanted me to.

But the reality was that he didn’t.

“Marriages have been started on far less,” Charles said, crossing her arms at me.

“Not back home they’re not. When I get married, it will be because I’m in love, and he loves me.” I glanced at the open window, not wanting to continue this conversation. I didn’t want to tell her that I’d let the time travel cat out of the bag with Hartley. Or about the items I’d shown him. When I had gone up to my room to figure out what to take into his study as proof, for a moment I’d considered bringing down my clothes. But I worried that Hartley might have had a heart attack if I showed him Victoria’s Secret.

I could see her mentally creating a list of all the reasons why she thought Hartley and I should get married, and I was too worn out to listen to them. Sir Reginald suddenly streaked past us, thankfully headed straight for the backyard. Right where I said I’d meet Hartley. “I better go grab him before he takes off!” I called over my shoulder, grateful for the chance to escape.

But the black cat was nowhere to be found. I didn’t worry too much, knowing that tomorrow morning I’d wake up to find him hovering over me, like some feline Grim Reaper.

The grass was actually dry for once, and I kicked my shoes off. Rosemary would chase me down and force a bonnet on my head if she saw me out here without one, so I went into the hedge maze. I wanted a few

minutes to myself before Hartley came out here to tell me what he thought about my reveal.

That had probably been one of the scariest things I'd ever done, telling him the truth. When I'd imagined Hartley's reaction to last night, the one thing I hadn't considered was a proposing Hartley.

I sat down on a stone bench in the center of the maze. Some part of me had wanted to throw my arms around him and say yes, I absolutely would marry him. But I couldn't. Because I wanted to go back to my own time.

Didn't I?

But what if I didn't have any choice in the matter? What if one day I just woke up in my own bed in the correct century? I wouldn't want to leave Hartley the way that Libby had left him. I'd heard the pain and sadness in his voice when he talked about her, even if she was a lying, cheating wench. After everything he went through with her, I couldn't be responsible for abandoning him, even accidentally.

I heard someone walking through the grass, and my pulse leaped as Hartley came around the maze corner, a serious, kind of scary expression on his face. My lungs constricted as my throat closed in.

Did he believe me?

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

THINGS I'M GOING TO INVENT IF I GET STUCK IN 1816

Twinkies

"What is your name?"

Of all the things I expected him to ask, that one hadn't occurred to me. "Emma. You know that."

He had paused at the hedge, but now he walked down the path to sit directly across from me on a matching bench. "I was speaking of your surname."

"Oh. Damon." Another thing I'd been lying about for weeks.

There was a wry twist to his lips. "Like a daemon, sent to bedevil and vex me?"

"Ha ha." I realized that I was twisting my skirt, anxious for his response to what I'd told him. "So?"

"So?" he repeated, crossing his long legs in front of him, his black boots shiny in the sun.

"Do you believe me?" The words were so hard to get out. The last time my heart had beat his fast we'd been . . . never mind.

I wouldn't blame him if he didn't believe me. If it hadn't happened to me, I wouldn't have believed it, either.

Hartley stayed quiet for a minute as the smirk fell from his face. Then very seriously he said, "I believe you. I don't pretend to know how such a thing would be accomplished, but you have given me evidence that makes it rather hard to ignore or dismiss your claim."

A wave of relief washed through me, chasing out all the fear and anxiety. I was struck with the urge to laugh. "I don't know how it happened, either, but I have a theory. It might seem far-fetched."

"More so than traveling through time?" I loved his teasing tone. It made things seems normal between us again.

"I think it was magic. I think I said a spell and ended up here. My guess is that I have to find a spell to take me back home. Since the original paper

was in your house, my hope is that you have a book or something that will have the way for me to get home. I've been searching for it."

Was it my imagination, or had his face gone pale? He cleared his throat. "Since you are still here, I assume that you haven't found such a book." Letting out a sigh, he continued, "I wish you had come to me sooner. I could have helped you."

It was on the tip of my tongue to tell him that Charles had already been helping me look, but I refrained. I didn't want to bring her into this conversation, fearful that I might slip up and say something I shouldn't and reveal that the women in his family had magic. I'd already blown up his worldview enough.

"Sorry about lying. It's just that I had this roommate who majored in musical theater, and I probably saw her production of *Oliver!* like three times, and I didn't want to die in the streets of London. I was afraid you would kick me out if I told you the truth."

That intense gaze, the one that made my stomach flip, was back. "I never would have abandoned you. I might not have believed you initially, but I would have done my best to assist you."

My heart glowed warmly at his words. All this time I'd spent afraid had been for nothing. Hartley was such a good man, of course he would have done what he could to help. "I know."

He adjusted his coat, slightly pulling it away from his chest. "It is rather odd to think that my present is your past."

"Yeah. And I even studied this time period in college. Oh, women totally go to college in the future. And have jobs. And own property. We even get to vote for president." Okay, maybe I should have been holding back, but where Charles hadn't wanted to know anything about the future, Hartley wanted to know absolutely everything.

He asked about what my life had been like growing up. How people lived and what their homes were like in my century. I finally got to tell him everything about my parents' accident, how I'd grown up in foster care, what school was like, how I'd studied American history.

"You miss your time," he interjected.

"So much! We have such better stuff than you. Like indoor plumbing. We shower on a daily basis and have toilets that take everything far away. And toothpaste and toothbrushes. And real soap and shampoo. And razors! You have no idea how much I want to shave my legs!"

I went on to tell him about electricity, television, and movies. About computers and the Internet. The last one was a little hard to explain, but I told him that the entire sum of human knowledge could be accessed at any time for any reason to answer any questions.

He looked awed. “And what do the people use such a thing for?”

“Mostly cat videos and porn, unfortunately.” Not wanting to explain what one of those words meant, I started talking about the food. “I really miss junk food.”

“You ate food made out of junk?” He looked so adorably confused.

“It’s food that’s not very good for you but is so delicious you don’t care. Like Twinkies.” I explained that they were these little oval sponge cakes that had whipped cream inside. That led to a discussion about more food, and I talked about what I’d eaten on the airplane, which led to a long conversation about how flying worked. I talked and talked, and time just sped by. I tried my best to explain everything, but even I realized that so much of what I said was either incomprehensible or too fantastic to seem real.

I also told him about the bad things. About terrorism and crime and prejudice and all the hard things that went on in my world.

“I would suppose that every time period would have their advantages or disadvantages. No place would be perfect,” he mused. “That what would matter would be the people you chose to pass it with.”

That drive I felt to go back to my own time? That was about being timesick, not homesick. He was right. The people who loved you mattered. I felt more at home here than I ever had anywhere else. I wanted to pass my time with Charles.

And with Hartley.

Who would never feel the same way about me. Desperate to change the direction of our conversation, I said, “At least I didn’t go into the future. I could never have pulled off that allover black leather look.”

“People will wear black leather as replacements to their clothing?”

“I don’t actually know,” I said in a rush. “In movies people in the future always wear black leather.”

“That sounds rather uncomfortable.”

“You have no idea. I tried leather pants once. They nearly had to call the fire department to use the jaws of life to pry them off me.”

He blinked. “There were approximately six words in that last sentence that I understood.”

That made me giggle, and there was movement in the periphery of my vision. I glanced up and saw Sir Reginald high up in a tree above us. I wondered whether he planned on dropping down on my head in his plan to destroy me. Then the cat cocked his head to one side with a look that I’d never seen before. Was he scared? Had he gone too high? Even if he was planning on doing me in, he had alerted me to Mrs. Farnsworth trying to break into my desk drawer. Didn’t I have some responsibility to save his life? What if I let him die and then slavery wasn’t abolished or something? The tree had plenty of low branches, which would make it easy to climb.

“Before I forget, your housekeeper has been trying to break into my locked drawer to get at my stuff. You should probably fire her. And now I’m going to go save that stupid cat,” I told Hartley as I stood up. I was about two feet up when it seemed to finally dawn on him what I was doing.

“You can’t climb a blo—a tree.”

“Why? When I was eight my foster parents had these fantastic trees. I used to pretend that I was a fairy and go up as high as I could. I can climb trees just fine.”

Now he was standing next to the trunk, glaring up at me. “I am not questioning your ability, only saying that it is not a ladylike thing to do. Or modest.”

Pausing, I grinned at him. “I’m not flashing anybody. If you’re looking up my skirts, then you’re not a gentleman, and that’s on you.” Not that I was much worried about it given all the layers I wore. But I liked when I could tease him.

It was then I realized that my corset wasn’t bothering me. Even if it had moved my pancreas to where my stomach should be, somehow I’d gotten accustomed to it. At some point it had just become a part of me.

Much like living here in Hartley Hall.

I got closer to Sir Reginald, and just before I reached him, the cat unfolded his limbs, stretched, and sauntered down the other side. Just leaping from branch to branch, totally unconcerned.

“Please get down before you get hurt.” Hartley’s voice sounded drawn, his face tight.

“I won’t get hurt. It’s not like I’m going to fall and break my . . .” I realized too late what I was saying. “Oh, Hartley, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean

to . . .”

He walked away from the tree, and I carefully came down, jumping the last little bit. He stood in the middle of the garden, in a grassy spot. I put my hand on his shoulder, and he slowly turned. His expression was so haunted, so lost. I wished that I could hug him. Instead I left my hand on his arm.

“I’m sorry,” I repeated. “I shouldn’t have joked. I know what it means to lose someone.”

“Yes, you do. You have lost your parents along with your entire world. Your loss must feel more tragic and intense than mine.”

I probably should have moved my hand, but I didn’t. I definitely shouldn’t have moved closer to him, but I did. “It’s not a competition about who feels worse. Loss is loss. But you can be glad that you remember her and that you have some happy memories. I don’t remember my parents at all. I don’t know what they looked like or how they sounded.”

Was it my imagination, or was he edging toward me? “At least you are not to blame for their demise.”

Hartley had to get off his guilt trip. “I need you to listen to me,” I said.

He gave me a small half smile. “You rarely give me a choice in the matter.”

That made me smile back. “This is important. It wasn’t your fault. Her death was an accident. You shouldn’t blame yourself.” There were lots of things I wanted to add. That obviously that Libby woman hadn’t really ever loved Hartley if she had married someone else. And considering how important honor was to him, I found it really hard to believe that he would want to be with a disloyal woman who had acted so dishonorably. Who had encouraged that same behavior in him. She had brought out the worst in him. I settled on, “You deserved better. You still deserve better.”

I was *thisclose* to offering myself up as a possible candidate when he responded, “As do you.”

Technically our bodies weren’t touching, but the space between us was almost nonexistent. Did he mean something by that? Could Hartley ever love me the way that I loved him? “Who do I deserve?”

His hands moved, and the tips of his fingers skimmed along the side of my face, and I couldn’t help but close my eyes and breathe deeply. My

heart hammered hard in my chest, making it difficult to keep air in my lungs.

Why was it that when he barely even touched me I experienced a million different sensations at once? It made me feel like I was under a spell even more powerful than the one that had thrown me through time.

Directly to him.

I opened my eyes to see that expression in his eyes again. Just like the one from last night. Filled with wanting and desire but tempered with something softer. Affection? Adoration?

Could he tell how much I craved his touch? His kiss? Did he know how hard I'd fallen in love with him?

"Emma . . ." He breathed the word out, almost like he hadn't intended to say my name. I loved when he dropped the "Miss Blythe" thing and called me Emma. It was like he'd shot little love arrows straight into my heart. But he did attempt to finally answer my question. "You deserve a husband who will protect you. Who will care for you."

Who will love me? I wanted to ask but didn't. I closed the gap between us, sliding my hands around his waist, wondering if he would push me away.

He didn't.

"And who is that man? Who should be my husband?"

"I . . ." The words seemed to catch in his throat as his hands moved from my face to the back of my neck, his gaze fixed on my lips. "It is my responsibility—"

"Not another pity proposal," I interrupted him. I had wanted it to sound like a joke, but it didn't come out that way. Which was most likely due to the flashes of heat his burning touch sent through me.

And I didn't know if another proposal was the direction he'd been headed, but if he wanted to marry me, it needed to be because he loved me. Not because he felt an obligation or responsibility toward me.

His lips hovered above mine, and I wanted to kiss him so badly that I almost cried out in frustration. But he had to make that decision. While sober, so that he couldn't blame it on anything else.

"I am not feeling any pity at the moment." His husky words made my stomach flip, bottom down to my feet, and then skyrocket back up to my throat.

“Me neither.” How I managed to form words in that moment was beyond me.

Every torturous second that passed made my fiery need coil up inside me so tightly I worried I might spontaneously combust.

“If not pity, then what are you feeling?” he asked, and as his mouth moved it grazed the top of my lip, and I felt that explosive sensation even in my toenails.

And despite the fact that I was literally putty in his hands, I still retained some tiny shred of dignity. I wasn’t going to make a complete fool of myself by admitting to something he wouldn’t say back. “You first.”

That made his eyes darken and his grip on me tighten, which I was all about. “I am feeling as if I would very much like to . . .”

His words trailed off as he lifted his head. My pulse throbbed so loudly in my ears that it took me a second to realize why he’d stopped. He’d heard someone coming.

Then I heard it, too.

“My lord?”

It was Stephens. Headed through the maze, looking for us. We glanced at each other in panic and hastily let go. We went to opposite ends of the hedges while I smoothed out my hair and my skirt and he straightened his coat and cravat. We didn’t look disheveled, but even I knew how bad this could look.

And I wouldn’t force him into marriage.

“Over here!” Hartley called out, looking cool while all my nerve endings were so frazzled I hoped I was able to walk out of the garden under my own steam.

An out-of-breath Stephens finally reached the center of the maze, where Hartley had his hands behind his back and that world-weary expression on his face. While I was very interested in the pattern of the leaves that made up the hedge.

The butler glanced at both of us, but I knew he would never betray Hartley even if he did suspect something was up.

Not that anything had happened, but I had the distinct feeling that it almost did.

“What was it you needed?” Hartley asked.

He gave us a slight bow. “My lord, I have come to inform you that your brother has arrived.”

Hartley had only one brother. James.

James was here.

And I felt nauseous.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

THINGS I'M GOING TO INVENT IF I GET STUCK IN 1816

A human-to-cat dictionary. And a woman-to-man dictionary.

As we walked back to the house, there was a distance between us that made me feel even sicker. I had honestly planned to be back home by now. James had been this shadowy figure who wasn't real. But now he was here. I was about to meet him.

Stephens could have gone on ahead, but he stayed with us like some kind of self-appointed chaperone. Which was probably a good thing because it seemed like lately whenever Hartley and I were alone together, it was only a matter of time until we started kissing. Burn-down-the-house-hot kinds of kisses. Which prevented me from thinking clearly, obviously.

It was totally one thing for a guy to want you. It was quite another for him to love you.

I needed to stop confusing the two.

Not that it mattered now. James had finally shown up, and my window with Hartley was closing.

As if Mother Nature got how I felt, the skies above us darkened just as we reached the parlor. Stephens held the patio door open for us, and Hartley glanced up at the clouds. "We should hurry inside before an older gentleman starts collecting things in pairs."

Now he joked? I felt like my whole world was falling apart, and he thought this was the time to make some kind of Noah reference? Seriously?

They waited for me to go first, and as I entered the room, a loud crack of thunder shook the house's frame and the ground under my feet. I cringed and immediately felt Hartley walk up behind me, as if ready to comfort or protect me.

"Are you well?" he asked softly, but my eyes were trained on the man standing near the fireplace.

He was tall like Hartley and had the same sun-kissed hair as Hartley. He turned slowly, and there was no question that this was James. He had light-brown eyes and a warm smile.

Objectively, he was hot. He shared Hartley's DNA. How could he not be hot?

But there was no thrill. No zing. No racing heart when I saw him. I only half listened as Hartley made the introductions, offering my hand while James bowed over it. Neither one of us were wearing gloves, and while his hands felt a little like Hartley's, they weren't warm like his. I didn't shiver when James touched me.

He was Diet Coke. Not quite like the real thing.

"It is an honor to make your acquaintance, Miss Blythe. I have heard a great deal about you."

I totally forgot all my manners. "You too, J—I mean, Mr. Portwood." I probably should have curtsied at some point during this exchange, but I watched Hartley instead. Wondering what he was thinking. Now that his brother was here, would he change his mind? Would he give up his scheme to get me married off to James? I sat on one of the sofas, and the brothers sat a second later in matching armchairs.

The two men made small talk and both tried to draw me into the conversation several times as they spoke about James's travels. But I was still too keyed up from what had almost happened in the garden and couldn't make myself concentrate. Was it just physical between Hartley and me? Did he feel something more? Why did he keep kissing me? Was I just convenient?

At some point, the brothers must have given up on trying to include me and just talked to each other. Which was good, because I had too much to think about. Holding in a wistful sigh, I wished Bex were here so I could talk to her about it. She was the only person who would be on my side. Everybody else wanted to marry me off.

A few minutes later both men stood, startling me.

"If you will excuse us, Miss Blythe, my brother and I have some family business to discuss," Hartley said. They bowed slightly, and this time I would have made Charles proud in remembering how to respond.

What family business? Was I the family business they were going to talk about?

James walked in front of Hartley, leaving the room first. And just as he walked past me, Hartley turned. His voice was low and urgent. “As to your question earlier, I still believe it would be best for you to marry my brother. He will protect and care for you, and given your unusual circumstances, you will be in need of both. Especially if you have to stay.”

He bowed again and left before I had a chance to respond. A red haze lit up the edges of my vision, and my lungs constricted in my chest. Why would he want me to marry James when he kept kissing me like I was the only woman in the whole world who mattered? Why did he act like an overprotective boyfriend when he intended to pass me along to his brother? He didn’t treat me like I was going to be his sister-in-law. He behaved like he wanted me for himself.

But his actions never seemed to match up to his words.

What was I supposed to trust? How he acted or what he said?

I raced across the room, ready to confront him. He didn’t get to almost kiss me and then say I still had to marry his brother. I almost smacked right into Charles, who popped up in front of me like some kind of witch-in-the-box.

“Have you made James’s acquaintance yet?” she asked, her eyes dancing. She was up to something, no doubt.

“I met him, yes. And?”

She studied me carefully, probably noticing my heaving chest, my balled-up fists, and my angry expression.

“Have you ever seen a group of dolphins, my dear?”

Surprise diffused my anger. “Yes.” I didn’t have time to explain to her about SeaWorld and school field trips.

Princess barked once at me and then sat next to Charles’s feet. “I saw a great deal of dolphins while accompanying my husband aboard his ships. Do you know what happens when a dolphin is ill? I was told that dolphins need to move or they die. And they need to stay close to the ocean’s surface for air. When a dolphin becomes too ill to swim, the other dolphins stay with him. They nudge him, helping him up to the surface.”

Was this a metaphor or a literal thing given her abilities? I did not want to be turned into a dolphin. Before I could say as much, she went on.

“People are sometimes like dolphins. They just need a nudge to bring them back to the surface.”

And after dispensing that bit of wisdom, my so-called chaperone went up to her room with her dog.

Who needed the nudge? Not me. I knew what and whom I wanted. Was she saying Hartley needed a nudge? To get over his dead girlfriend and see if we had a future together?

But how could I nudge him?

As I thought of ways to find out whether or not he had real feelings for me, I walked through the foyer, just near the study. Until my feet struck something warm and solid, sending me tumbling down face-first.

I just avoided hitting my head and turned over to see Sir Reginald blinking back at me. “So I save your life, and this is how you repay me?” Dumb cat. I got up, stretching to test my limbs to make sure I hadn’t broken anything. I didn’t want some 1816 shaman attempting to fix a fractured tibia.

“You know, you could try and do something besides plot my death. Why not make yourself useful?” I asked the unmoving feline. “Like help me find the spell I’ve been looking for.” I let out a sigh, worried that me having a conversation with Sir Reginald was probably indicative of how stressed out I’d become.

Then the strangest thing happened. The stupid cat meowed at me. Repeatedly. Like he was trying to speak to me. Maybe I actually had hit my head and was now imagining things.

Sir Reginald took a few steps forward and expectantly looked over his shoulder. He meowed again. It was like he wanted me to follow him, crazy as that might have sounded. Not traveling-through-time crazy, but close.

While recognizing that none of this made sense, I followed him anyway. And once he saw that I was doing what he wanted, he sprinted upstairs and trotted down the hallway. It wasn’t easy to keep up with him.

He stopped in front of Hartley’s room and meowed. Glancing from left to right to make sure I was alone, I opened the door, and the cat darted inside. I closed the door shut and locked it, not wanting to be discovered by any of the staff. The sight of Hartley’s bed made my cheeks flush a deep pink, and I focused on Sir Reginald instead. He meowed at another door, and we walked through a small room containing Hartley’s clothes to another door. I opened the door to the second closet, and it was the same size as Hartley’s, but there was a distinct feminine scent here. It was faded, but I could definitely detect lavender.

The shelves and armoire were empty. Had this room belonged to his mother? And had anybody even been in here since she died? Unlike the rest of the house, these shelves were covered in dust, and the sunlight filtering in through the dirty window was full of motes that I kicked up.

Sir Reginald jumped on top of a small desk and meowed.

This was crazy. I had followed a cat through the house like he was Lassie and was going to help me save Timmy.

But I'd come this far. I opened all the drawers. Dust flew up, causing me to sneeze three times in a row. Like the shelves, they had all been emptied out.

"There's nothing here," I told the cat. He blinked at me in response but maintained his vigil on top of the desk.

I'd found a secret door behind Hartley's portrait. And I'd certainly seen enough movies to know that old desks had hiding places. I started pushing on knobs, feeling really silly.

Right up until the moment when I pushed a raised fleur-de-lis and a slot opened just underneath the main part of the desk. Hand shaking, I reached in and pulled out a thin stack of papers. I thumbed through them, heart pounding in my throat. A few pages in I found what I was looking for. Not only did the words seem familiar, but a bolt of recognition shot through me. I knew this was it.

The way back home.

I hurried out, not stopping until I reached the safety of my own room. I silently read the page over and over again, not daring to say the words aloud.

This was it. This was what I had been desperately searching for. I could go back to electricity, sanitation, and better personal hygiene. And razors! First thing I would do was shave my legs, as they had taken on a gorilla-like appearance.

But . . .

Hartley.

I loved him. And I didn't want to leave him. Not while there was still a chance. Not until I knew for sure that he either didn't or couldn't love me. Not until all hope was gone.

Sir Reginald came in the room and jumped onto the bed next to me. "So all I had to do was ask you and you would have led me to this spell earlier?"

The cat blinked lazily before curling himself into a ball and going to sleep.

There was a knock at my door, and I shoved the papers under the pillow. I went to answer it and found Charles. I hoped I looked calm, because my nervous system was freaking out.

“I have arranged for a carriage to take us shopping, and then we will return home to dress for a musicale I am hosting in James’s honor. It will be a small affair; I only wanted to make sure we celebrated the occasion.”

“Give me a second to grab my stuff. I’ll be right down.” I didn’t particularly want to go shopping given what had just happened, but I intended to keep it to myself for now.

Grabbing my bonnet, I slammed it down on my head. I used my key to open my locked drawer and put the papers inside. Hartley still had my phone and my watch, but I knew he would keep them safe. Making sure the drawer was secure, I joined Charles downstairs.

Once we were on our way, I couldn’t help myself. I had to ask. “Hey, do you have any, like, magic animals?”

“Magic animals?” she repeated. “Sometimes we have familiars. Magical creatures that take on the appearance of animals. They often help to guide and protect young witches. My mother said they were also useful for divining information. Why do you ask?”

That explained what had just happened to me. But did she not know about Sir Reginald? Did Jane? He had been her cat. I supposed it didn’t actually matter whether or not they knew. It seemed that he wasn’t out to kill me. He was here to help me. Had already helped me. Why? Who had sent him?

But if I told Charles my reason for asking, I would have to tell her about what I found. “Just you talking about dolphins earlier and seeing how attached you are to your dogs. It made me wonder.” I didn’t like lying to her, but it felt necessary in my current situation.

Charles bestowed a beaming smile on Princess. “My dogs are just dogs. Wonderful, loyal, loving dogs.”

I watched the buildings and trees as we drove past. I could guess what Charles would want me to do. She would want me to stay. She might even do something to force me to stay.

But I would be the only one who decided what was best for me and my future.

* * *

Seeing Emma's belongings still on his desk, Hartley nonchalantly placed several papers on top of them. He glanced at his brother to see if he had noticed, but nothing in James's expression indicated that he had. Letting out a small sigh of relief, Hartley dropped into his chair while James sat across the desk from him.

"So Miss Blythe is the woman you wish for me to marry? To keep me away from Amelia Godwin?"

Hartley's mind had remained in the garden, caught up in the memory of the feel of Emma's soft skin, the urgent desire he had to kiss her senseless and make the entire world fade away. The world that had come crashing down when his brother had arrived.

And he had planned to subtly manipulate James into doing what he wanted. Hartley had not counted on James already knowing about his plan. "Who told you?"

"Julia."

"How the devil does Julia know?"

James had not stopped smiling since he sat down. "Jane, of course."

Hartley should have accounted for the gossiping of his sisters. They were extremely close and did not believe in keeping secrets from one another. It meant that Jessica, even though she was far away, most likely also knew.

Was there a way to salvage his scheme? Because this marriage had to take place. Not only to keep James from Miss Godwin and to ensure an heir to the earldom, but because Emma needed a husband. The things she had shared with him about the future made her marriage imperative. Someone else might think her mad and have her committed to a place like Bethlem Hospital. She had to be kept safe.

"Am I to take it that you mean to thwart me?" Hartley asked.

"I did not say that," James responded. "Tell me about her."

The request made something twist in Hartley's gut. There was so much he wanted to say as tribute to her, but he held his words back. He wanted to tell James how capable and strong she was. That he was sure he would not have fared half so well if he were forced into her century. But at the same time how soft and vulnerable she could be, provoking long-dormant protective instincts.

Or how her quick wit had moved him to laugh more in the last few weeks than he had laughed in the last few years.

How she had won over every one of their family members and collected the admiration of so many influential members of the *ton*.

That he admired her and generally liked her as a person.

As an actual friend.

But he did not say these things to James, because to say them would reveal that his thoughts about Emma had been less than proper, particularly given the basis for this discussion. So instead he asked, “What would you like to know?”

“I saw for myself that she is pretty. But is she amiable? What made you think I would want to take her as my wife?”

Pretty nearly felt like an insult. Emma was breathtakingly beautiful, exotic looking and enticing. But he didn’t contradict James. “She is amiable.”

That made James laugh. “You are not hawking her wares very well. What’s wrong with her? Is she simple?”

“There is nothing simple about her. She is an extremely intelligent and well-educated woman,” Hartley retorted, still stung at James not appreciating Emma’s beauty. “Although she often chooses to treat reason and logic with a certain degree of flexibility.”

“Most women do,” James said. “I’m glad. I expect to have an intelligent wife. One that is unlike your Miss Amesbury.”

“Don’t,” Hartley warned. He didn’t want Libby to be brought into this. His family had never cared for her, and James bringing her up made him experience a sharp guilt he hadn’t felt in a long time.

He realized it was because Emma had made him forget.

“Don’t what? Say her name? Why ever not? You were admittedly blinded by love, but she was not a bright woman. You would have tired of her quickly. She was unworthy of your devotion.”

Drawing in a deep breath, Hartley refused to contradict his brother or to make Libby a part of this conversation. “We were speaking of Miss Blythe. And I wanted to mention that she is a quieting sort. She does not feel the need to have all eyes on her or to be the center of attention.”

This did not redirect the conversation as Hartley had hoped. From James’s expression, he knew what his brother was thinking. He was again

comparing Emma to Libby, who had always wanted to be the most popular woman in any room.

And “quieting” was most likely an inaccurate description. While Emma was not loud and boisterous in the company of others, Hartley did not feel quieted while with her. She agitated him. He always felt on edge around her, as if he were being challenged. He found himself in a constant state of anticipation to see what she would do or say next. And she might have made life confusing, but she also made it interesting and exciting. It seemed he did not prefer things to be routine and reliable, as he had once thought.

“Is she selfish? Mean-spirited?”

“Not at all.” Hartley felt the need to rush to her defense. “She’s kind. Even to the servants. She’s always noticing them, calling them by name, and thanking them. The other night Stephens brought us our tea. He’s had a bit of a rough patch lately. He stumbled, and Emma jumped up to help.” His instinct was to correct her, but he had found that he had no voice. He could only watch as she soothed Stephens’s injured pride and put everything to right.

And then he had felt ashamed. Ashamed that he hadn’t leaped to Stephens’s rescue first. “She is the sort of woman that makes a man want to be better.” Even he couldn’t deny the roughness in his voice. “Which would obviously make her the perfect wife for you, James. You so desperately need the improvement.”

“Not as desperately as you,” his brother laughingly countered, and their ribbing eased Hartley’s wariness at what he was feeling. James relaxed back into his chair. “Miss Blythe has your seal of approval, then? You believe she will make a suitable wife and mother?”

Hartley meant to say that he had no doubt Emma would make both an excellent wife and mother, but the thought that she would actually marry James and give him children felt like a physical blow. His insides knotted, and he took in a long breath to calm himself.

This was the end goal. To keep James away from that gold-digging shrew and her horrific family. But the reality of it was pressing down on him as if he were Atlas, tasked with holding the heavens on his shoulders.

It was too much to bear.

He didn’t want Emma to leave.

James and Emma could live with him. Either here or at their country estate. There was plenty of room. The idea flared up quickly, like kindling set aflame, but he tried to quickly extinguish it. No. It would undoubtedly be worse to have Emma so near but permanently and irrevocably untouchable.

And as he imagined her belly swollen with James's son, his fists balled up, and he wanted to slam them against his desk. He somehow managed to refrain. He clamped his teeth together, eyeing his brother. He inexplicably desired to punch James. Hartley forced his breaths to become deeper and more even. He never would have been able to explain to his younger brother why he had hit him.

Because he couldn't have admitted the truth to James.

Just as he couldn't admit the truth to himself.

There was some sort of commotion in the foyer, and Hartley and James were situated so that they could plainly witness Emma tripping over his sister's cat. She landed hard. Hartley shot to his feet, ready to assist her. But instead of feigning helplessness or fainting, she got up and gave the feline a stern rebuke. Her words were unintelligible, but her tone was apparent.

"I'd have kicked that cat," James murmured.

"As would I."

The two men silently watched as Emma finished her lecture and left.

"Was she having a conversation with him?" His brother sounded both worried and amused.

"I believe so, yes."

"And you're certain she's not cork brained?"

"Quite," Hartley responded. Emma Blythe, er, Damon might have been many things, but she was not a stupid woman. He thought of all the evenings they'd shared together—either at some social event meant to bolster her reputation or the quiet nights they stayed home, playing draughts and talking while Aunt Charles napped by the fireplace.

He never could have enjoyed their time together if she had been a dullard.

It was then that Hartley noticed James staring at him. "What is it?"

James sounded incredulous. "You're smiling."

Realizing that he was right, Hartley forced the corners of his mouth to droop down. As if he could deny that recalling his memories had evoked

that reaction.

“I apologize for looking so surprised,” James continued, “But it’s been so long since I’ve seen you do it that I didn’t realize you still knew how. And Miss Blythe is responsible for this?”

Swallowing down a large knot, Hartley managed to gruffly say, “She is responsible only for mayhem and confusion.”

But his tone and words did not fool the younger man. “And the smile. She is responsible for the smile.”

There was nothing Hartley could say to that. He knew that he would not be able to dissuade James from his conclusion.

Even more surprising, he found that he did not wish to.

Then James uttered three of the worst words Hartley had ever heard.

“I’ll take her.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

THINGS I'M GOING TO INVENT IF I GET STUCK IN 1816

Escape hatches

If this was Charles's idea of a small affair, I didn't want to be involved with what she'd consider a big party. There were so many people crammed into one room. The servants had opened the windows, but it didn't seem to lessen the people-generated heat.

Or the body odor.

Hartley had a deep hatred for what he called "crushes" like this one, and I totally got it. I was feeling a bit like a sardine. It was cruel and unusual punishment.

And to make matters worse, all these teenage girls were playing musical instruments and singing. Badly. Every time I thought the torture had finally come to an end, some girl would present a new way to make my eardrums bleed. Not that I could sing, but I at least had the decency to confine it solely to my baths and not inflict it on other people.

I couldn't help but compare the music party to my earlier shopping trip. One was terrible, the other had been wonderful.

Ever since I'd found the spell to take me back home, I'd been considering what it would be like to stay.

Asking Hartley to come with me would be impossible. Not only because I didn't know how it worked—it might very well take me back and leave him here—but because I'd decided a long time ago I wouldn't be like his dead girlfriend. I wouldn't ask him to give up everything.

I was the one who could adjust. Even to excruciating parties like this one. As I thought about how Charles and I laughed and talked, it struck me how comfortable I felt, how normal everything was. I wasn't a fish out of water anymore. I felt like I belonged. I was happy. And I realized that for the first time, I didn't really want to go back to the twenty-first century.

The feeling was cemented when I glanced across the room and Hartley raised a glass to me in silent, sarcastic amusement at the wannabe singer

who apparently had never met a flat note she didn't like.

His raised eyebrow and smirk made me giggle, causing several people to toss me dirty looks. The Duchess of Warfield, seated right next to me, glared back at them, and it made everyone mind their own business again.

The business of having their ears assaulted.

Sitting next to the duchess had been Charles's idea. She wanted James to see us together, to witness for himself just how popular I was. And much as I loved hanging out with her, I really wanted to be talking to Hartley.

I started applauding when everyone else did and excused myself to head outside. It had rained earlier, surrounding me with that damp, earthy smell that I had come to love. There were several couples out on the terrace, and I smiled and nodded as I sat on a stone bench.

There was a rush of heat behind me, and I closed my eyes as my heart fluttered, almost giddy at the thought that Hartley was sitting so close to me.

"Are you enjoying the evening?" he asked in a teasing tone, letting me know that he already knew the answer. His breath was warm against the exposed part of my shoulder, sending shivers across my skin.

"On a scale of one to ten? It sucks."

I both felt and heard his laughter, and I turned slowly to face him. It was like he suddenly realized just how close we were, and he backed up as much as the bench would allow. I briefly wondered whether I could lure him back into the maze so that we could finish what we'd started that afternoon.

Those memories forced me to clear my throat and talk about something else. "Is being tone-deaf a British thing or a nineteenth-century thing?"

A smile flitted across his features. "They're not all that bad."

"Yes, they are. I'm slowly losing my will to live."

"With the ability to listen to whatever type of music you wished at any given moment, I can imagine this might be . . . different for you."

I shrugged a shoulder. "This is kind of boring, but I get that you want to entertain yourselves. Because you have a lot of downtime here. Time to think. No phones, no TVs, no computers, no cars. Just . . . quiet."

"Is that a problem for you?"

"Actually . . . I'm finding I kind of like it. The quiet and the dumb parties." His hand was on the bench between us, and I wondered what he

would do if I reached out and touched him. I didn't. I settled for saying, "But tonight I'd much rather be playing checkers with you."

His murmured response was so soft that I hoped I hadn't imagined it. "As would I."

The flutters in my heart turned into full-on bass drums.

Another one of those tense moments passed between us, where he had that look in his eye like he wanted to throw me over his shoulder and have his way with me.

Which I was totally good with. "Earlier—"

He didn't let me finish what I wanted to say. "Earlier you mentioned that you didn't know anything about your parents. Now that I've had time to consider the matter, I realize that I do know something about them."

What?

He gave me a small smile before continuing. "They must have been intelligent, quick-witted, kind, and loving people. Your mother in particular must have been exceptionally beautiful."

My thudding heart froze, dropped into my stomach, and raced up to my throat, where it lodged itself, making it difficult to speak.

"And tall," he added. "Very, very tall."

I couldn't get over the "exceptionally beautiful" part. Was he saying that he thought I was exceptionally beautiful? I wanted to go and grab one of the vases full of flowers and throw their petals all over the house while saying, "Exceptionally beautiful! Exceptionally beautiful!"

"Are you happy here?"

Finally, I could speak. "I am." I wanted to say, *I'm happy with you*, but I wasn't ready to tell him yet. Just like I wasn't ready to tell him that I knew how to get home. I didn't want to force his hand or give him an ultimatum. I wanted to find out how he felt about me, and if he didn't feel anything for me beyond attraction, then I would go.

And I could be patient and wait for the right moment. I literally had all the time in the world.

"Excellent. That pleases me." He lifted his hand as if he wanted to touch me, but instead put it on his lap. "Because I've spoken to James, and you've no further need to try and entice my brother. He has agreed to my proposition and to make you his wife."

Whoa! So not where I hoped this conversation was going. "What? Don't I get a say in it?"

He straightened his back. “I thought we had already decided this was in your best interests.”

“No, you decided and didn’t give me a choice,” I growled back at him. He had the audacity to look surprised. “And just so you know, even though men haven’t changed much in the last two hundred years, in my time they do generally let women decide who they want to marry.”

“I hope I am not interrupting.” James wore a big old grin that I had the urge to smack off his face. Which was unfair, because none of this was his fault. “I find that I am too eager to speak with Miss Blythe.”

There was this fraction of a second where Hartley looked upset, but he stood. “Of course. Good evening, Miss Blythe.”

He walked away, and my skin felt raw and painful. Like he’d torn a piece of me off and taken it with him. But the worst part? He didn’t even look back at me once.

“I’ve heard that quite a bit of manipulation has taken place to make this moment possible.”

It took me a second to realize what he was saying. He knew. About the plan. “So you found out,” I said to James as he sat down. I thought of all that scheming and planning, being under Charles’s wing, getting in good with the duchess, trying to win over society so that James would want me. All of it had been for nothing.

“You seem upset,” he said gently, like he was worried he might set me off.

“I worked really hard so that you would like me, and you said yes to his idiotic plan without even spending five minutes with me. Without finding out how popular and awesome I’ve become.” Saying it out loud made it sound dumb.

“Would you rather I’d said no?”

“Yes. I really would rather you’d said no.”

I had half expected him to be insulted, but instead he laughed. “May I confess something to you? I have no intention of marrying you.”

And even though I’d just said I wanted him to say no, my pride was injured. I didn’t want to marry him, either, but he should totally want to marry me. Before I could demand an explanation, he provided one.

“While you are a lovely girl, and I think we would suit quite well, it has become clear to me in the time I’ve spent with my brother and from the

myriad of letters I've received from every one of my feminine relations that you and Hartley are perfect for each other."

"What? I mean, beg your pardon?" Why were his words freaking me out? Why was my pulse beating so hard?

"My brother is rather stubborn, and it will take some convincing, but I have a plan of my own."

I couldn't stop myself. "Fantastic. Another Portwood family plan." I was getting a little tired of those. Magical or otherwise.

"Do you love him?"

If I'd had a mouth full of liquid, I would have spewed it everywhere. "What? Are you even allowed to ask me something like that? Because that is so none of your business!"

There was a mischievous glint in his eye. "It is my belief that my brother cares a great deal for you. And given your reaction, I suspect the feeling to be mutual. Which would mean we are about to become family. Which makes it my concern."

I could actually feel my cheeks getting hotter, and that made his grin even bigger.

"Given his disposition, I will have to help him realize his feelings for you. Hence, the plan. But only if you are game, Miss Blythe."

Something in his voice gave me pause. "What exactly would that entail?"

"Hartley and I have always been very competitive, given that we are only a year apart in age. It is my theory that if he were to believe you carried a tendre for me . . ."

"A what?"

"Feelings. Of the affectionate variety."

That just happened to be what I already had for Hartley. Feelings. Of the love variety.

"So you want me to pretend to like you, and you think that he'll get jealous and confess his true feelings? That kind of seems like a douchey thing to do."

James blinked at me several times. "Hartley mentioned that you are sometimes perplexing with your word choice. However, if I take your meaning, you're concerned about tricking him. I am simply proposing that we force him into recognizing those feelings."

"How?"

“Among other strategies, I thought he should find us in a compromising position.”

Alarm bells started ringing inside my head. Because now I knew what that word meant. “How compromising?”

“Come.” James got up, offering me his hand.

“Aren’t you worried about ruining my reputation or whatever?”

“If we move quickly, it will be only Hartley who see us.”

I let him help me up and followed after him, not at all sure about this plan. I probably shouldn’t have gone along with it, but I thought of Charles’s words. Maybe this was the nudge I’d been looking for.

It took me a second to get my bearings, but then I realized we were in front of Hartley’s study. I pulled back on James’s hand, digging in my heels and forcing him to stop This wasn’t a nudge. It would be a bludgeoning. “Whatever you’ve got planned, we should stop. Your brother is going to be mad, and then I’ll get yelled at.”

That made James turn, his expression both serious and inquisitive. “Hartley does not lose his temper. He is known for his restraint.”

“Seriously? Because he yells at me all the time. And he once punched a dude, I mean, man, for . . .” He wouldn’t understand “hitting on me.” He would probably think that Godwin had actually hit me. “Saying some inappropriate things to me.”

“Interesting. That would suggest a degree of emotional investment.”

Before I could ask what he meant by that, James suddenly yanked me into his arms.

Where he kissed me. While simultaneously kicking over an urn. Probably to make sure we were caught.

It was weird. Like, he knew what he was doing on a technical level, but it didn’t do anything for me. Not to mention that his breath was awful. Like tar and smoke. It was nothing like kissing Hartley.

As hoped, doors flew open near us, and both Charles and Hartley walked out. So much for only Hartley seeing us.

Charles looked delighted. Hartley looked furious.

I quickly disentangled myself from James.

“Come along, Emma. I wanted you to have a chance at the pianoforte. And then I thought perhaps some dancing?” Charles sounded so calm and reasonable as she gently linked our arms together.

I had only a moment to glance over my shoulder at the two brothers who were, as I'd predicted, yelling at each other while they entered the study. "Are you really not going to say anything about what you just saw? Aren't you supposed to be the chastity police?"

"I saw nothing, heard nothing, couldn't have stopped it even if I wanted to," she said with a breezy wave of her hand. "Do you play, my dear?"

"Just 'Chopsticks,'" I replied, hearing the study doors shut. What were they saying? What would happen now?

"Is that an American tune?"

"I don't actually know. But I probably shouldn't play it for your guests." I didn't want to add to the heap of sound manure that had already been piled on that evening.

"Then you must help me organize the dancing. I was just telling Hartley that my hired musicians arrived and the ballroom is being prepared."

Charles chattered on, and my mind drifted as we walked through the house. I kept thinking about how James had said Hartley didn't yell or lose his temper. He'd done nothing but lose his temper since I'd shown up. Did that mean something? That I was the one who had that effect on him?

Billy walked by us, carrying a tray of some kind of dessert. It looked strangely familiar. "Wait!"

The footman nearly tripped over his own feet, skidding to a halt. "Yes, Miss Blythe?"

"What are those?" I asked, reaching out to take one. I took a bite, and it was a sponge cake with cream inside. While the flavor was a little off, it was definitely a nineteenth-century version of a Twinkie.

"The chef calls them Pierres, after himself."

The first thought I had was that I had probably just screwed the Hostess company out of millions of dollars in the future. The second was that Hartley had done this. Hartley had the chef make Twinkies.

For me.

Hope bubbled up in my chest, strong and pure. It had to mean something. I needed it to mean something.

I could only cross my fingers and pray that the nudge had worked.

* * *

“Are you mad?” Hartley practically sputtered the words, almost too furious to even speak.

James stood there as if he hadn’t just behaved abominably. “I am quite sane, thank you. I am not sure I understand your concern.”

Not understand his concern? Hartley closed the study doors, just barely refraining from slamming them. “You were just kissing Emma where all of God and country could have witnessed it!”

“I am quite certain neither God nor England would care had they witnessed it.” He put his hands behind his back, his eyes dancing with mischief, looking just as he did when he was twelve and dropped a frog down the back of Jane’s dress. “And do you mean Miss Blythe?”

“Of course I mean Miss Blythe!” Now he was using her given name aloud, in the presence of others. A line had been crossed, and he had to cross back.

“My dear brother, are you actually yelling at me?”

He was. He was yelling. It seemed to happen rather frequently where Emma was concerned. *Miss Blythe*, he angrily corrected himself, as James just had. “I am only trying to . . .” His voice trailed off, and he knew that he had no explanation that would satisfy either his brother or himself. “You should not be kissing her.”

Hartley’s blatant hypocrisy stared him in the face. How could he be angry with James for kissing Emma when he had kissed her so many times that he was beginning to lose count?

That was untrue. He had not lost count. He had not forgotten a single moment of what it felt like to hold her in his arms—the shape of her lips, the taste of her mouth, her pliant softness and eagerness making him forget himself again and again.

If anything he should be pleased. This was what he had wanted. For James and Emma to wed. For an heir to be born, ensuring the earldom would continue.

He again imagined Emma large with James’s child and felt physically ill. And a sort of ugly jealousy he’d never experienced before. What was wrong with him? This was what he wanted. Why was he feeling this way?

Unaware of Hartley’s inner struggle, James said, “I’m not sure what the issue is with me kissing my bride-to-be.”

Hartley’s throat felt thick with an emotion he couldn’t identify as rage raced through his veins. Remembering a trick his mother had taught him

as a child, he counted slowly to ten in his head before answering. He impressed himself with the steadiness of his reply. “Are you betrothed yet? Has she accepted you?”

That mischievous twinkle in his eye was back. “We are not betrothed yet. Would it bother you if we were?”

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

THINGS I'M GOING TO INVENT IF I GET STUCK IN 1816

Porta-potties

Would it bother him? It hardly seemed a strong enough word. Particularly since Hartley had briefly considered committing fratricide. He opened his mouth several times, intending to speak but unable to find the right words.

The words that would absolve him of his inexplicable negative reaction to what he'd spent months plotting.

Realizing a response would not be forthcoming, James continued. "Asking her is only a formality at this point, is it not?"

Even if it was only a formality, James had just put Emma in an untenable situation. He had flouted convention. Why? Did he mean to embarrass Emma? The family?

Or perhaps James just liked Emma. And simply lost his head. As Hartley himself had done often enough. How could he fault James for that? They hadn't spent much time together yet, but Emma's charm, her beauty, her wit, her . . . everything. How could James not be drawn in?

"Not to mention, it felt as if she rather enjoyed it."

If Hartley had been forced to account for his actions later, he would have been unable to explain why he did what he did next. He grabbed his brother by the lapels, pulling him up from the chair, and planted him a facer, knocking him to the floor.

He felt both appalled and relieved in the moment that followed. He had forgotten his signet ring and had caused his brother's lip to bleed. He offered James his handkerchief. "My apologies. You are bleeding. You need to clean up before we rejoin the party because Emma faints at the sight of blood."

James dabbed at his lower lip, pulling the handkerchief away from his mouth to look at it. "No apologies necessary. That was an ungentlemanly thing to say. I deserved it."

Deserved it? Had James provoked him on purpose?

And if he had, why?

Hartley offered his brother his hand and noted the small smile on James's face, as if he knew something Hartley did not.

After James got to his feet, he tossed the handkerchief onto the desk. "I have a theory that I would like to share with you. I believe that you have feelings for *Miss Blythe*," he said, causing Hartley to realize that he had again referred to her as Emma, "which is why you planted me a facer and why you know such an intimate detail about her. It's the sort of thing that the besotted always know about their true loves. Because they care enough to know them."

He could not allow it to be true. "How can I not know that? She bloody faints every time someone is cut. Or how she gets angry when I'm trying to have a rational discussion with her. I can't get through two sentences without her collapsing into a heap."

"Rational discussion?" James still sounded amused. "It sounds like a brilliant plan to me. Perhaps I should have fainted so that I could have avoided this discussion." With a slight inclination of his head, James left the room, still wearing that aggravating smirk.

Hartley took a moment to collect himself before following after his sibling. James was right. He should have fainted. Because it was becoming increasingly clear to Hartley that even though he desperately wanted to deny that he had feelings for Emma as James had suggested, even he would be forced to admit that all his actions this evening pointed to the contrary.

* * *

I knew the exact moment that Hartley entered the ballroom. Not because I'd been watching for him, wondering if James's plan to make him jealous had worked, but because everything felt different when he was near.

Yes, it sounded stupid, but it was the truth.

Both brothers walked toward me, James grinning and Hartley looking like he was about to punch somebody.

James spoke first. "Miss Blythe, I've not yet had the pleasure."

My first instinct was to retort, *Get used to it*, but I refrained. "The pleasure of what?"

He blinked a few times at me while I made a point of not looking at Hartley. Or moving closer to him. Or wrapping my arms around him and begging him to elope.

“Of the dance. Shall we?”

I hesitated for only a second, hoping Hartley might say something. That he might pull out a sword and demand that James unhand me. I stole a glance at his face, his stony, jaw-clenched expression making him look like some kind of avenging angel, but he didn’t interfere as I put my hand on James’s elbow.

We stood across from each other in a line with the other dancing couples. Back in the future, I would have been beyond excited if a guy like James had asked me to dance. Now he just seemed all slick and playboyish. I liked charm as much as the next girl, but Hartley was more real. Even if sometimes I felt like I’d stumbled into some strange historical dream, Hartley always felt solid and substantial. I loved that. Honestly, I loved everything about him. Even the way I made him crazy. Because if James was right, and I was the only one who had that effect on Hartley, then he liked me. Maybe even loved me. Which sent whirls of giddy excitement through my belly.

I saw all the side-eye I got from other women in the ballroom. I couldn’t blame them. I was here with the two best-looking men in England. As I took in all the envious stares, it was then that I noticed Hartley was dancing.

With Lady Kitty. He almost never danced, and now he was dancing with that little man-eater. I wondered how long it would take someone to intervene if I ran across the room and started yanking out her naturally blonde hair in clumps.

“You’re jealous.”

Even though we were surrounded by other people, James and I were easily able to talk as we moved through the steps. “Jealous?” I repeated, startled to have been found out.

James flashed me one of those “I know what you’re thinking” smiles. “You have no need to be. I believe my brother to be quite immune to any other woman’s charms.”

Belief wasn’t enough of a reason to stay. “Why do you care? What do you get out of all this?”

He didn’t answer at first, waiting until we were walking slowly down the line of dancers to say in a low voice, “I get to see my brother happy. I want him to be happy and at peace. I am surprised to see him dancing this evening. Miss Amesbury, his former fiancée, loved to dance, and he stopped after her death. When I told him the world didn’t stop dancing because one dancer left the stage, he didn’t speak to me for weeks. I am no comfort to my brother.”

Poor James sounded haunted. Was that why he stayed away so often? Did he think he caused Hartley pain? I wished I could hug him. I settled for patting him on the arm.

I changed the subject, and after the first dance finished he asked me to dance again, so we did. The music for the second dance ended, and as we applauded the musicians, Hartley approached us with that disdainful expression. Not that I could blame him. Being around Lady Kitty probably did that to a person.

“Would you honor me with another dance?” James asked, his voice sounding as if he wanted to laugh but kept it in.

Wait. Something about that was wrong. Charles had mentioned that I was allowed to dance with a man only a certain number of times before it was like announcing our engagement. From the look on Hartley’s face, I remembered that number was two.

“Miss Blythe has promised the next dance to me,” Hartley interrupted, his voice almost like a snarl.

My heart beat so loud, the orchestra could have kept time to it. Hartley extended his hand, and my own trembled in anticipation. I was so head over heels for this guy that the prospect of just dancing with him again seemed like the most thrilling thing in the entire world.

A short older man climbed the dais and nodded to the musicians. He began to sing a slow, operatic song. I noticed the other couples around us waltzing.

I would get to waltz with Hartley! Even better. I sighed in pleasure as his hand went around my waist, and despite our gloves, I could still feel the warmth of him filling in the space between us. Then we were stepping, gliding, twirling.

“At least you’re wearing a corset this evening,” Hartley said, his voice a mixture of amusement and annoyance.

I felt so much like a princess in a fairy tale that I just smiled as my reply and concentrated on forcing my body to stay back a respectable distance. It was enough to be near him. To have him hold me.

To be where I belonged.

“Are you enjoying the performance?”

There was something different about Hartley. The way he looked at me, how he felt the need to fill the silence between us, some unexpected quiver in his voice.

I’d never been into opera, but it was impressive to have someone so talented singing it live, something I’d never experienced before. And we were getting a private performance in an opulent and beautiful room full of happy, rich people who sparkled and laughed as they turned in large circles. It made me feel a little like I was in *Pretty Woman*. Only there was no flying on a private plane to an opera house. And I wasn’t a hooker.

“I am enjoying it. He’s good. Like throw-your-panties good.”

That earned me a raised, questioning eyebrow from Hartley.

“In the future when some women really like a musical performer, sometimes they throw their, um, underclothes at the musician.”

He blinked a few times before responding, “Here we just applaud.”

That made me laugh, and he grinned, tightening his grip on my hand. And it was him who pulled me slightly closer, letting his strength and warmth and delicious smell envelop me.

I wanted to stay here, in his arms, for the rest of the night.

For the rest of my life.

When he spoke again, his voice sounded low and gruff. “In case I hadn’t mentioned it earlier, you look truly exquisite this evening.” Both the tone of his voice and his words made all my nerve endings spark with delight and excitement, as my heart flopped around like some out-of-water fish, caught in the net he had spun just by speaking.

Charles had chosen a perfectly tailored pale-pink dress for me to wear, and Rosemary had been particularly proud of the tiny pink rosebuds she had put in my hair. I had plenty of borrowed jewelry.

But none of that made me feel beautiful.

The way he looked at me then, like I was precious and mattered and he wanted me and adored me—that was what made me feel beautiful. “Thank you.”

That caught him off guard. “What? No retort? No self-deprecating remark?”

“No. Just thank you.”

The air between us was so charged and thick that I was surprised no one else seemed to notice. His eyes drifted down to my lips, and I knew exactly what he was thinking. And that I wanted it just as much as he did. My breaths became short and shallow as my skin tingled everywhere that he was touching me.

Would anyone notice if we snuck out?

I was about to suggest as much when his breath hitched as he said, “Emma . . .” in a way that made my toes curl inside my cute little satin flats.

“Our aunt sent me to fetch you.” James’s voice sounded so far away that it took me a moment to register he was there.

And that the music had stopped.

Realization dawned on Hartley at the same time, and he released me. It was like he had torn even more pieces of me off and taken them with him as he stepped back, slightly bowing.

“I will watch over Miss Blythe,” James offered, returning the scowl to Hartley’s face. He left without another word and without looking back at me.

“Why do you do stuff like that that you know will make him mad?” I asked as James offered me his arm, walking across the room to where the Duchess of Warfield was hanging out with some of her entourage.

“I told you. I’m a scientist. I need to experiment in order to prove my theory correct.” He greeted the duchess’s group and made some small talk.

Then he turned back to me, saying he needed to take his leave, as he intended to go outside and enjoy his cheroot.

“Your what?”

“My cigar,” he said, patting his coat.

Ew. That was why he had tasted so gross. “Those things will kill you. They cause cancer. And if you don’t know what cancer is, it’s a really terrible type of illness that can’t be cured and is terminal. Not to mention that they make you smell.”

He cocked his head at me, bewildered. “You truly say whatever you’re thinking. My sisters will adore you. Which works out well, since my

brother already does. As was obvious to everyone in the room when you danced. If I harbored any doubt before, that has all been erased."

Part of me wanted to go girly on him and jump up and down screaming, "Really? Do you think he likes me?" While the other part, who had been alone her whole life and couldn't conceive of any universe where a guy like Hartley would ever go after a girl like me, wanted to tell him to shut up and that he was seriously mistaken.

"I have an idea. Go wait in your room," James said. "I believe it will prove my theory one way or the other. I will send him to you."

Whoa. "That is super not allowed." Even if I had technically been in Hartley's room once already, James didn't need to know that. "I don't want him to feel forced or like he has to marry me. I'm not interested in trying to trap him."

"That was not what I had in mind. You can speak to him in the hallway. My guess is that if he's willing to take the risk of going to your room, that it will be proof enough." James bowed over my hand. "Trust me, Miss Blythe. We are to be family soon, after all."

He headed for the open balcony doors, leaving me unsure of what to do. I might be missed. People left all the time to go home or fix a torn skirt or use the Regency version of a portable bathroom (don't ask, it looked like a gravy boat, and I couldn't bring myself to try it). On the other hand, someone, like that little Lady Kitty, might notice that Hartley was gone as well and put two and two together. What if we were caught? I supposed if it came down to it, I would just go back home. I didn't want to be with someone who would always resent me for tricking him into marriage.

But James was right. If Hartley did come up to see me, then he would be taking an awful risk that showed he cared. That this wasn't all just one-sided.

I made my apologies to the duchess and her friends, saying I didn't feel well. When I got to the stairs, I grabbed my skirts and ran until I got to my room. After I closed my bedroom door, I checked my reflection in the mirror. I tucked in a couple of stray hairs and noticed how pink my cheeks were. I didn't know if it was from the running or the excitement.

I brushed my teeth, again wishing for real toothpaste, and splashed some water on my face. Putting on some of my favorite Creamsicle perfume, I sat down in one of my chairs and waited. I wondered how long

this would take. How much time I actually had. I crossed my legs and noticed the black hairs sticking out of my stockings.

Enough was enough.

Disgusted, I rang for Rosemary, and when she arrived I asked for one bucket of hot water and a razor. I was going to shave my legs. Not because I thought it was necessary or that things would go that far, but because I wanted to be as confident as possible and resembling King Kong would not help.

She got what I asked for, and even though I could tell she wanted to chat about that evening's festivities, I shooed her out of the room. The razor was much longer than I thought it would be. It was like shaving my legs with a machete. I took off my shoes and stockings, throwing them on the bed. I put some towels down on the floor and sat. Using the soap, I scrubbed my right leg until I had a nice lather, like I did back home when I ran out of shaving cream.

"Steady," I mumbled to myself, carefully dragging the razor across the top of my calf. The first pass was done, and I could see skin again. Hallelujah!

It had also been a lot easier than I'd thought. Why hadn't I done this months ago? I fell into the steady rhythm of soaping up my legs, running the blade along the length, and then rinsing it off.

Which allowed my brain to drift off to its favorite activity. Thinking about Hartley. What would he say when he showed up? He would show up, right? Would he finally admit that he loved me? Kiss me into oblivion again? Propose for real?

As I imagined him professing his undying devotion, I pushed a little too hard on the razor as I rounded my knee. Burning, searing pain made me gasp, and I must have hit a vein because blood started spurting and—

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

THINGS I'M GOING TO INVENT IF I GET STUCK IN 1816

Aspirin and vitamins

"Emma darling, do wake up." It took me a minute to realize that it was Charles who spoke to me.

And that I was in bed.

And there were a bunch of people in my bedroom.

"What happened?" I asked, struggling to sit up, but my head felt woozy, and I lay back down.

"You cut yourself and lost a great deal of blood," Charles explained from where she sat on my right side, holding my hand and patting it. "The doctor wants you to rest until you feel yourself again."

It came back to me—the razor, cutting myself, the blood. My good old vasovagal response had made me pass out. Wonderful. Hartley must have found that particularly attractive. Me with one hairy leg and the other bleeding.

If he'd been the one to find me. Had he shown up last night?

My eyes darted around the room. Charles, Rosemary, James, a couple of the footmen, Stephens, and a man I guessed was the doctor, packing up his medical bag. He said something to James, and then Stephens escorted him out.

No Hartley. "Where's Hartley?"

James looked at me uneasily, as if he didn't know what to say. "He left before dawn this morning. To go to Rosewood. Our family estate."

My chest suddenly felt too tight, my throat thick. Why wasn't he here? Did he not care?

"What happened to you last night?" Charles asked, and I wondered if she was trying to change the subject.

It took me a second to realize that I was almost crying, and I took a couple of deep breaths to calm down before I answered. "I was shaving my legs, and I cut myself and fainted. Then I woke up here."

Charles asked the remaining servants to leave, and once the room was cleared, she turned back to me. “Hartley found you lying in pool of blood. He called for help, lifted you onto the bed, used his cravat to bind your wound, and waited for the doctor. Once the doctor had inspected you and declared that your wound should heal easily with little risk of infection, Hartley . . .” Her voice trailed off, as if she were uncertain what to say next. Which was so unlike her.

“He fled like a bloody overgrown coward in the middle of the night,” James offered, his derision obvious, with arms folded as he leaned against the doorframe to my room. “Beg your pardon.”

“One can hardly blame him,” his aunt retorted. “He discovered Miss Amesbury in a similar state. I’m sure it was quite a horrible shock.”

I hadn’t even thought of that. I pressed both of my hands against my head, wishing the pounding would go away. My heart hurt to think about how he must have had horrible flashbacks or some kind of PTSD when he saw me, how it must have reminded him of her.

But even so, he had taken care of me and made sure I would be all right. He hadn’t frozen or run away. He acted. He protected. He cared.

So very Hartley.

“I have to go to him. I have to show him that I’m okay. Er, that I’m fine.” I tried to sit up again, and this time it was easier. “I’m going to need some red meat and lots of water.” I wished they had aspirin, but I had to get some iron and fluids in me, and that would have to be good enough. I wasn’t going to let him suffer or worry.

Because despite me almost bleeding myself out, Hartley had come. He was the one who found me. He’d taken that chance and had come to speak with me. That meant something.

Now I had to find out what. No more hoping, no more waiting. It was time Hartley and I had a serious talk.

James nodded and rang for Rosemary.

“When can I leave?” I asked Charles. Even though I wasn’t back up to full strength, I knew this headache would eventually fade, and in the meantime I would deal with it.

“We can go within the hour. We will have to pack and have the carriage made ready, but we will do our best to make haste.”

“We?”

“Darling girl, I would never let you travel the roads of England alone. Highwaymen and ruffians around every corner,” she sniffed.

“And I am determined to see this experiment through to its logical outcome,” James added, having given my maid her instructions.

“I think we should give chase. What say you?” Charles asked.

“I say let’s do this thing.” At their blank expressions I added, “I say yes. Let’s give chase.”

Everything happened quickly. James and Charles left to get their stuff (or, more accurately, have their servants get their stuff), and Rosemary had me fed and watered and in a new gown, packing lots of things to take with me to Rosewood. I offered to help, but she’d looked insulted and insisted I lie in bed and heal.

I spent the time practicing what I would say to Hartley. Should I just tell him that I loved him? Let him take the lead? Because even if I’d given him some kind of nightmarish flashback, if he didn’t care about me, he wouldn’t have run away.

Right?

Then we were in the carriage and on our way out of the city and into the country. James was across from us reading a book, and Charles was next to me, a reassuring and comforting presence. My headache faded with each turn of the wheel, and nervousness mixed with anxiety threatened to overwhelm me.

Because this was it. One way or the other, I was going to find out how he felt about me, and this would end.

It was reassuring I wasn’t rushing into the breach alone. “I’m glad you’re here.”

Charles patted my hand. “Dearest girl, you didn’t think I’d miss the third act, did you?”

* * *

Word had come that a carriage with the Hartley family crest approached, and Hartley had ridden his favorite stallion, Neptune, to the top of a hill, watching it come.

It was indeed his carriage, and he knew that Emma was in it.

Which immediately made him think of the previous night. It had been the worst moment of his entire life.

James had approached him, saying that Miss Blythe wished to speak to him. That it was extremely important and she would wait for him in her room.

The impropriety of the request immediately struck Hartley, along with the heated memories of what had happened the last time they'd been alone in a bedroom together.

He'd actually debated with himself. Because every instinct and emotion in him insistently urged him to go. To see her and to tell her all the things that he had been thinking about. How he didn't really want her to marry James. How he didn't want her to give James heirs.

How when they danced he finally admitted to himself that he had fallen madly in love with her.

There could be no question. No further denials. Hartley loved Emma, and he wanted her for his wife. He wanted children with her, a future with her.

He knew what he would be asking of her if he offered marriage. What she would give up. A world full of marvels and magical-like objects that he couldn't even imagine. He had nothing to offset her loss other than his love.

He had hoped it would be enough.

Anxious to declare himself, Hartley decided to set aside propriety and his own code of honor to seek her out in a place he wasn't supposed to be. He could only hope that James would understand, since he'd already all but promised Emma to his brother. That this lapse could be forgiven.

He had knocked on her door. Knocked again. Called out her name. Wondered if he had misheard his brother and even now she waited somewhere else in the house. He heard the howling of his sister's cat from inside the room, and he opened the door, and the sight of her lifeless body nearly knocked him to his knees.

Emma. Blood. Blood everywhere.

He had rushed to her, expecting to find her dead, pain and fear threatening to drown him. He cradled her with shaking arms against his chest. Another punishment for forgetting himself and everything he said he stood for. He cried out in relief when he felt her breath against his neck, warm and strong and alive.

Carrying her to the bed, he unwound his cravat and found the injury. It had already stopped bleeding, but he still applied the white cloth to her

leg. He rang the servant's bell, and when her abigail arrived, he gave her instructions to have a doctor fetched and his aunt found and brought up.

Hartley knelt at the side of Emma's bed, begging God not to take her from him. That he would trade his life for hers. Promising that he would stay away from her and behave as an honorable gentleman where she was concerned as long as the Lord would allow her to live.

The next few minutes were utter chaos as servants rushed in and out of the room. Charles arrived and put her arms around Hartley's shoulders, but he couldn't hear what she said. Somehow, he had done this. He didn't deserve to feel reassured.

After an eternity, a doctor arrived and inspected Emma. He declared her to be fine, just in need of rest. The wound did not seem too deep and did not require stitching. He did not think it would become infected.

Relief flooded through Hartley. She would live.

Which meant that he had to now keep his word to the Almighty. He would let her go and keep his feelings to himself.

He couldn't stay here. He couldn't be near her and not tell her the truth. Even now, when she couldn't hear him, he could barely keep the words contained. He wanted to tell her that he loved her. That he loved her so much he was willing to walk away.

Finding his valet in his bedroom, Hartley had him quickly pack and a horse made ready. He told Stephens where he was going and rode hard for Rosewood.

The distance was necessary.

Because his love would get her killed.

And while he understood that he was being entirely illogical, some part of him believed it and refused to listen to reason.

He had spent the day riding with his steward, looking over the estate he had always loved. One of the stableboys had ridden out to tell him about the carriage, and they had gone to this hill to survey the road and saw the truth of it.

"Shall we ride out to meet them, my lord?" the steward had asked.

"No," Hartley nearly choked on the word. "We still have much to go over."

And he had much to avoid.

* * *

Hartley hadn’t come home last night. He had been gone the entire day we arrived and sent word he was staying at a nearby inn. I was tempted to find it and confront him. My maid had spent hours getting me ready for dinner, and he hadn’t even showed.

I had also expected to meet his younger sister Julia, but she was away visiting friends because she didn’t know we were coming. Which was disappointing as I had wanted to find out what she was like.

Charles started muttering under her breath about how she wished she could turn Hartley into a toad so his outside would match his insides.

To distract me, James offered to take me out shooting. Bows and arrows. “So I can get my Katniss Everdeen on?” I asked, and he had looked predictably confused. I didn’t bother to explain.

We went outside to the gardens, away from the massive mansion the Portwoods called home, and one of the servants had set up some targets for us to practice with. James explained stance to me, how to hold my arms, how I should breathe when I let go, and how to aim.

None of it mattered. I wasn’t distracted. I wanted Hartley and missed him so much that I physically ached.

“Let out your breath, and release.”

I let the arrow go, but it completely missed the target and instead hit an old run-down church, somehow breaking a windowpane. “Oh! Sorry!”

“That’s quite all right. That church hasn’t been fired upon in over three hundred years. I’m sure it doesn’t mind.” James then shot his arrow, hitting the target dead center. “Besides, it means I definitely win. And I have to uphold my appalling lack of sportsmanship somehow.”

He made me laugh. And I hadn’t laughed at all in the last couple of days.

Then, of course, I immediately thought of Hartley, and my stomach twisted itself up into knots. “Why do you think he’s staying away?”

James shrugged one shoulder before shooting his second arrow, hitting almost the same spot as the first. “Because I was right and my experiment is proceeding exactly according to plan.”

“Your plan was for him to avoid me and break my heart?”

At that James put the bow down and turned, taking both of my hands in his. “I am sorry for the pain you are suffering. My brother has much to confront within himself before he can admit the truth. As the Bard said, ‘The course of true love never did run smooth.’” He softly squeezed my

hands and then let go. “Now let’s practice actually hitting the target before someone up at the house thinks they’re being invaded and calls out the guard.”

I laughed again and tried to remove Hartley from my thoughts.

It wasn’t working.

About an hour later, Charles joined us. “Hartley will be home for supper this evening. But we will not be. I’ve made plans for you and I to call on some neighbors.”

My heart had initially jumped for joy and now flattened out in despair. “But why? I want to see him.”

“That’s precisely why. He has left you to twist in the wind for the last two days, keeping himself from you. Now we will give him a taste of his own medicine and see how he likes it.”

“Excellent idea,” James agreed. “You should let him miss you, and maybe he will stop being so obstinate.”

I was the lone dissenting voice, but I didn’t stand a chance against the steamroller that was Charles. Before I knew it, my clothes had been changed, my hair done, and we were on our way to visit people I didn’t care about and didn’t want to meet.

All I kept thinking about was the moment when I would see him again and what I would say.

And what I hoped he would say back.

CHAPTER THIRTY

THINGS I'M GOING TO INVENT IF I GET STUCK IN 1816

Uber

Hartley had not anticipated seeing Emma with James. He watched them practicing archery together—the way his brother used any excuse to touch Emma as he helped her shoot, how James had made her laugh—and it was all Hartley could do to not demand satisfaction when James held her hands.

He'd had to give Emma up. He should want her to be with James, who was a good man and would give her a good life. It was written all over his brother's face that he cared for her, and he had to assume that Emma felt the same. It was still what made the most sense. It would keep James away from Amelia Godwin, and it would keep Emma safe and protected.

What a fool he'd been. Again, he had nearly given up everything that mattered to him for a woman who did not love him as he loved her.

The only choice left was to keep his anger and hurt to himself. Encourage James and Emma to wed and to be happy, to follow the plan that he himself had spent a great deal of time and money on.

Despite preparing himself for seeing her at supper, both she and Charles had gone to visit neighbors, leaving him to dine alone with James.

Seething, Hartley had nothing to say to his brother that wouldn't end in fisticuffs. James kept up a stream of nonsense, something about a botanist from London that Hartley easily ignored. Supper ended, and a bottle of port was brought out. James had a glass poured, but Hartley waved the footman off.

"Are we going to discuss it?" James asked, leaning back in his chair.

"What have we to discuss?"

His brother arched an eyebrow at him. "Your feelings for Miss Blythe."

It was as if James had punched him in the gut; he felt short of breath, his stomach tight and nauseous. "I don't know what you're speaking of. My heart has always belonged to another."

That made James roll his eyes. “If Libby had loved you, and that point is debatable, but if she did . . . wouldn’t she want you to be happy? Find another love? When you didn’t return quick enough she did just that. Moved on with her life with someone else.”

“Don’t.” The word was clipped, a warning.

“What? Tell the truth? You have been entrapped by Miss Amesbury for far too long. It’s as if she’d taken you with her when she died. And since I’ve returned home, I am seeing the man you used to be. My brother. And the reason for that is Miss Blythe.” James leaned forward, putting his drink down. “Why can’t you admit you love her?”

“Because I don’t!” Hartley roared the words back, slamming both of his hands on the table, causing James’s glass to rattle. “I don’t love Emma! I will not marry her!” Whether he said these words for his brother’s benefit or for his own, he did not know.

“I know you, and I know that’s not true. And I know that your intentions toward her are honorable—”

He cut James off. “You speak to me of honor? Honor is all I have left! I was dishonorable in my behavior with Libby. If I’d been stronger, if I hadn’t set aside my honor and morals, if I had refused her, she would still be alive.”

Several moments passed in silence before James replied. “It wasn’t your fault. It wasn’t even Godwin’s fault. It was an accident. You can’t spend your life blaming yourself or wondering what might have been.”

“Perhaps not, but I can stop myself from being weak again.”

“It isn’t weakness to love. It strengthens. It builds you up. It makes you happy. A reason to get out of bed in the morning and deal with the dreariness of this world. It makes everything else worthwhile. It is the greatest thing we can hope for in our lives.”

Anger bloomed inside his chest again. “That’s a pretty speech from a man who is encouraging me to chase after the woman he loves.”

James looked thoroughly confused. “I beg your pardon?”

“I saw you today.” Hartley gripped the arms of his chair, forcing his fists to stay away from his brother’s face. “I saw you with her, practicing archery. She loves you. She barely tolerates me.” Speaking the words aloud for the first time caused both relief and sadness.

“You blistering fool. I knew you were there. I was trying to make you jealous. Everything that has passed between me and Miss Blythe has been

with the sole intent of making you jealous so that you would finally admit that you are desperately in love with her. And I know it worked because I still have the loveliest of bruises to prove that you are a man in love."

So many thoughts and emotions flooded Hartley in that moment that he didn't know what to think. Nothing had happened between Emma and James? It had all been a ruse designed to force him into admitting his feelings? It had worked most effectively, but Hartley thought his brother might be owed another facer for such a scheme.

There was a sound of James scooting his chair back as he stood. "Your honor will be all you have left if you don't tell Miss Blythe how you feel. Even she will tire of your moodiness. She deserves better. As do you. Don't choose loneliness when such love is available to you."

Then James was gone, leaving Hartley to his thoughts and swirling emotions. Needing to do something, he stood up and headed outside. The night air was cool and heavy with an impending rainstorm, thunder rolling in the distance. Without thinking, his steps led him to the family cemetery.

Libby had been buried at her husband's estate, but Hartley had constructed a small memorial to her here. He ran his hands over the smooth marble, sinking to the ground. He had always imagined her to be the perfect woman. Had he truly loved her? How could he have when he'd never really known her?

His family had been right. The Libby he loved would never have married Godwin. She would never have considered running away with one man while married to another. He thought of her cruel jibes that he had overlooked or ignored.

Libby had planned on using him for his title and fortune. She had been selfish and manipulative and uncaring of who she hurt. He had refused to see her as she truly was, so convinced that they would live a charmed life together. He'd held on to that dream for far too long. No, not a dream. A lie.

Hartley had been in love with the woman he wanted her to be rather than the woman she was. Not like Emma, who was nothing that he wanted her to be but instead was everything that he needed.

Emma. He had set such thick bars around his heart. But like some determined wood sprite, she had darted in and out of that cage, touching his heart here and there, refusing to stay out as she was meant to.

He loved her. Loved her in a way he hadn’t known was possible. He had thought his world had ended when he found Libby’s body, but it paled in comparison to how he felt when he thought Emma would not live. He had wanted to die alongside her.

There was no one moment that made him love her. No gigantic gesture, no single act. Instead, it was a compilation of so many little things. The way she laughed. The way she seemed to sway while supposedly standing still as if moving to music only she could hear. The way she challenged him, confused him, and intrigued him all at the same time. The way she smiled at him from across the table. Her intelligence. Her kindness. Her wit. Even the way she argued with him.

There was not one part of her he didn’t love completely.

“I am saying goodbye, Libby.” He let his hand rest upon the stone one last time. “I will no longer allow you to have any hold over my heart. Because it belongs to another.” In the morning he would ask Mr. Green to have the memorial removed. He didn’t want it here any longer.

He also offered his apologies to God for his foolish sentiments and mistaken belief that he could actually put Emma’s life in danger just by loving her. “I hope you will allow the retraction, as I plan to make her my wife. In a church, of course.”

Rain began to pour down then, thick and heavy, and it felt like an answer. It felt cleansing, as if the world was being washed anew, and Hartley was being given the chance to start over. Thunder boomed overhead, while lightning lit up the black sky. Emma was probably inside, cowering under a piece of furniture and inventing curse words to yell at the storm. That made him smile. She made him smile. And she made him happy. How had he been so blind?

He had to return to the house. Now. He would tell her that he loved her, and if she didn’t feel the same, he would spend the rest of his life trying to win her over.

* * *

I had found inventing headaches to be incredibly useful. I told Charles how unwell I felt, and our hosts had insisted we return home immediately, especially since it seemed a storm was on its way.

Charles had seen through the ruse, but we had said our goodbyes and returned back to Rosewood. Even though it was dark, I knew when we had arrived because the scent of roses filled the air, making everything seem more romantic. It wasn't just the incoming storm that made me nervous. It was what I was about to do. I wasn't going to let Hartley run away from me anymore.

The butler took our hats and coats. Charles turned to me with a wink and said, "I am feeling rather tired. Tell James when you see him that he is feeling tired as well and should also retire. And good luck."

I hugged her tightly. I hadn't even said anything about talking to Hartley, but she knew. I didn't have a plan. I still wanted to show him that I hadn't been hurt, and then somehow everything would just magically work out.

It was easy to find Hartley and James. They sounded as if they were yelling in the dining room. When I got to the partially closed door, something made me stop. The anger in Hartley's voice.

"I don't love Emma! I will not marry her!"

White noise howled in my ear, and it felt like a bomb of pain exploded inside my lungs, making my chest constrict. I backed away with my knees wobbling, as if I could get clear from the shrapnel of his words. Hartley didn't love me. He didn't want to marry me.

I was the stupidest person who had ever lived.

I had been so incredibly naïve. And so, so stupid.

There was only one thing to do now. I turned and tried to walk upstairs to my room. My feet felt like they were encased in concrete, making it difficult to put one foot in front of the other. I just kept hearing his words over and over again in my mind. *I don't love Emma. I don't love Emma.*

I grabbed onto the bannister, using it to climb the stairs. It was like wading through a pool of syrup. The air sucked at me, taking little happy pieces of my heart and peeling them away with each heavy step. It was so hard to breathe, so hard to move.

When I finally reached the guest room I'd been staying in, I sat down at the writing desk. It was laughable that I had intended to find a way to make Hartley stay with me.

Because now I was the one who was going to run away. I wanted to get as far away from him as possible. I'd put a couple of centuries between us.

But I couldn’t say goodbye to anyone. They’d all try and make me stay. Charles would tell me to just talk to him. Which would be pointless. Hartley had just made his stance on our potential relationship pretty clear. As far as he was concerned, it was nonexistent.

Instead I wrote a letter to Charles, thanking her for everything she’d done for me and for making me feel a part of her family. I asked her to write Rosemary a good reference letter. While my writing had gotten better, and I didn’t make blots as often, the ink was still running because I couldn’t stop crying. Hot tears burned their way down my face, my throat so raw with pain that I thought I was going to throw up. My whole body felt pressed down, as if the crushing sadness and regret were physical objects being shoved on top of me.

I wrote her name on the envelope. She would explain my absence to everyone—to her family, to the Duchess of Warfield. Anybody who would remember or care about what happened to me, I knew she’d find a way to explain it.

Maybe she’d just tell them that I went back to America. I pulled the bell for the maid and walked over to the window to wait, watching as tiny raindrops made serpentine trails down the panes. Like the skies were crying with me.

Because it wouldn’t be a lie. Much as I loved Bex, the first thing I’d do when I got back to my own time was get out of this waterlogged country and return home.

Home. Not that I had a home to go back to. I thought I had found it here. I thought this was going to be where I belonged for the rest of my life, and I had grown to love the idea of it just as I had grown to love Hartley.

It would never be my home now. The Portwoods would never be my family. I had been so incredibly, painfully wrong.

The maid arrived, and I asked her to arrange for a carriage to take me back to London.

“Do you need me to pack for you, miss?”

“No.” The words were stuck in my throat, making it difficult to speak. “There’s nothing I need from here. I just want to leave as fast as possible.”

She said she would fetch me when the carriage was ready. Thunder burst overhead, and I squeezed my eyelids shut. It wasn’t enough that Hartley just pulled my still-beating heart from my chest. Now I got to be terrified the entire way back to London. Hopefully Mrs. Farnsworth hadn’t jimmied

open my desk drawer yet and I could grab my stuff, read the spell, and someday this would all be like a bad dream. A forgotten memory.

Even if the stabbing pains in my heart reminded me that I would never be able to forget.

The maid came back, saying the carriage waited at the front door for me. As I walked down the stairs I realized the yelling had stopped. I didn't know where Hartley or James were, and that was not good. Since the universe seemed hell-bent on wrecking my life, I asked it for one favor: to not let me run into Hartley.

I didn't think I could bear seeing him one last time.

The butler, whose name I didn't remember, helped me with my coat and offered me an umbrella as he walked me to the carriage. "Do you have a message for Lord Hartley, Miss Blythe?"

I was going to suggest anatomically improbable things that Hartley could do with himself. I thought it would be better to just say nothing. But mixed in with the heart-wrenching sadness was a sliver of rage. "You can tell Mr. High-and-Mighty that I heard every word he said, loud and clear. And he'll never have to worry about seeing me ever again."

The butler, clearly confused and probably not willing to risk his job by passing on the message, settled for shutting the carriage door, plunging me into darkness.

The universe had granted my request. I was safely on my way and hadn't run into Hartley. I remembered the last time I had seen him and spoken to him was when we had danced at his townhome in London. My heart squeezed painfully as I thought of how in love I had been in that moment. When there was still a possibility of us. When I thought we might get our happily ever after.

Instead, I had been left with shattered hopes and a destroyed heart.

* * *

"You're dripping water all over Mother's Aubusson carpet. She'd have your head," James remarked as Hartley entered the billiard room.

Hartley ran a hand through his wet hair, flinging droplets everywhere. "I'm going to tell her."

James had bent over the table, queuing up to take a shot, but his brother's words made him freeze. "So you have finally come to your

senses?”

“Yes. And you were right.”

That made James straighten up. “I beg your pardon. Could you repeat that, please? And slowly, so that I might savor every syllable?”

To both of their surprise, Hartley began to laugh. “I suppose I deserve that.”

James grinned back. “Why are you wasting time with me? Go find your intended and declare your undying devotion!”

There was a soft sound in the hallway, and Hartley turned to see one of the underbutlers, the one running the household while Stephens was in London. He knew Emma would want him to remember the servant’s name, but he couldn’t recall it. “Yes?”

“My lord, I have a message for you. From Miss Blythe.”

James let out a laugh from his corner of the billiards table. “Someone should tell that poor girl that no more game playing is necessary. Her quarry has been sufficiently caught.”

“What is the message?”

The underbutler’s ears turned a bright shade of pink. “I do not think it necessary to repeat the entire message verbatim, but she said she heard your words loud and clear. And that you would never have to worry about seeing her again. Then she took a carriage to London. I spoke with the maid assigned to Miss Blythe’s care, and she said Miss Blythe planned to go home.”

A sharp pain stabbed into Hartley’s belly, making him feel as if he would cast up his accounts all over his mother’s favorite rug.

The underbutler excused himself, and James said, “She heard you. Earlier. When you said . . .”

“When I said I didn’t love her,” Hartley finished, his voice mangled with fear and loss. And he quickly realized what her message actually meant. “I must go after her.” He started for the stables, determined to find her before she did something irrevocable.

“In this storm?” James said incredulously, fast on his heels. “You’ll catch your death.”

“You don’t understand,” Hartley ground the words out, desperate to be on his way. “She knows how to go home.”

“Back to America, you mean? I would certainly hope she knows how to go home. I would hate to think I’m going to have a sister-in-law who

didn’t understand how to get on a boat.”

Not bothering to explain the seriousness of the situation, Hartley dashed out into the rain, running for Neptune. The stableboys tried to help him, but he practically roared at them like some wounded lion that he could saddle his own horse. He begrudged every moment of preparation.

Finally finished, he yelled and slapped Neptune’s hindquarter, urging the massive steed forward. Neptune ran quickly, obediently, his hooves eating up the ground beneath them, keeping time to Hartley’s frantic heartbeat. He prayed that they would be fast enough to catch her. Or that she would be slowed down in some way. That the carriage would lose a wheel. Or break an axle. Something, anything. He didn’t know how much of a head start she had.

Had it been only two days since he had begged God to let her stay with him? How could he have come so close to having everything he ever wanted only to lose it because of one idiotic moment of false pride?

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

THINGS I'M GOING TO INVENT IF I GET STUCK IN 1816

A version of Grimms' fairy tales with actual happy endings

I heard the coachman say, "Whoa!" and we came to a stop so sudden I was thrown from my seat. I sat on the floor for a moment, my heart pounding in my ears. Even though the rain was beating down hard on the roof, I could make out a man's voice, yelling, and the coachman yelling back.

Of course. The universe had figured it had done me a solid by letting me escape Hartley but now had to balance out the karmic scales by sending robbers after me. Or highway guys or whatever they were called.

As if it wasn't enough that I had already lost my shot at true love and happiness, now I was probably going to lose my actual life.

A sense of defeat and resignation overwhelmed me. I wanted to curl up in the fetal position and just sleep forever. It was too much.

The carriage door was flung open, and the person silhouetted by a flash of lightning looked like Hartley. I had to be hallucinating. Why would he be here? He didn't love me. There was no reason for him to come after me. I tried to stand up and immediately hit my head on the top of the carriage before collapsing back onto my seat. "Ow!"

The man entered the carriage, dripping water everywhere, closed the door, and sat down across from me. Even though I couldn't see him clearly, there was no question that it was Hartley. I would know the feel of him, his smell, his presence, anywhere. Even if I were blind and deaf, I would still know him.

The missing half of my heart.

Tears rose up in my throat, making it ache, but I was done crying over him. "Are you serious right now?"

"Why are you always questioning my intent? Do you think I would be here were I not serious?"

I didn't feel like explaining. And what kind of answer was that? "What do think you're doing?"

No response.

“Is something wrong?”

Still, quiet.

“Do I have to ask you seventeen more of these before you answer?” Now I was getting annoyed.

“I wanted to tell you a story.”

What?

“Once upon a time there was a dark earl suffering from a spell of sadness, an enchantment that he didn’t know how to break. He searched the kingdom high and low, looking for a way to laugh and feel joy again. Wise witches told him that a dragon had stolen his heart and kept it for a treasure. A magic spell sent a beautiful maiden to him, and he didn’t recognize the gift he had been given. He thought her meant for another, but she was always meant for him. To be his. She traveled through time to rescue the dark earl from himself, to single-handedly slay the dragon that guarded his heart. The dark earl discovered that he didn’t need a spell to feel joy again. He only needed to give the maiden his heart once she had set it free.”

Fearful hope began to bubble up inside me. Was he saying what I thought he was saying? A clap of thunder caused me to jump, and all of my nerve endings felt frayed. It was too much.

Hartley quickly slid across the carriage to sit next to me. Even though I was furious with him, his proximity was doing funny things to my insides.

“You said once that you loved the story of Cinderella because the prince was willing to scour the kingdom to find her.” His voice was low and sexy and much too tempting, his words hot against my neck. I closed my eyes, but that seriously only made it worse. “I would scour the kingdom for you. I would have scoured time itself for you. If you had gone back to your century, I would have found a way to follow you. I can’t make you a princess, but I can make you a countess, which is infinitely better because then you don’t have to live with the royal family.”

“What . . .” I found it hard to concentrate when the side of my neck was tingling like that. “What are you saying?”

“My darling girl.” He reached out and put one of his hands at the back of my neck and used the other to stroke the side of my face. And even though his sleeves were soaking wet, he still managed to create fire eddies everywhere he touched. “I’m saying I love you.”

All the air was sucked out of the carriage. I could not catch my breath. “You what now?”

“I love you.”

“But I heard you. Earlier. You said you didn’t love me and didn’t want to marry me.”

Hartley leaned in, his lips whispering against my cheeks, sending shivers across my spine. “I was such a fool. I was trying to convince myself because I was afraid to love you. Because loving you meant that if I lost you, I might never recover. And some part of me feared that you would go back to your own time and leave me, and it would be the worst thing to ever happen to me. And my apologies if you fancy yourself in love with James, but James be hanged.”

His wet hair dripped onto me, and I should have been cold. I wasn’t. His words burned me, imprinted on my heart, seared me in a way that made me his.

My poor befuddled brain, hazy and intoxicated from his nearness and confused by him saying one thing earlier and another thing now, couldn’t sort it all out. The very last thing I had expected was for him to chase after me and tell me he loved me and if I wasn’t mistaken, that he wanted to marry me.

His lips pressed against my forehead, so gently, so sweetly, that I was ready to start crying again. “You choose now, of all times, to fall silent?”

“I . . . I don’t know what to say.”

I felt him smile against my skin. “Had I known it would render you this quiet, I would have confessed my adoration months ago.”

“Oh, ha ha—”

His mouth was on mine, and while this kiss had all the passion and heat of our earlier ones, now there was something more. Something that still managed to make me go limp and hazy, but there was this deeper connection. I could feel his love for me. He used his kisses to show me how much he adored me, how much he wanted me, how I belonged to him and he belonged to me. It was like he was taking pieces of my soul and offering his own in return.

It was the kind of kiss that changed everything.

“Holy crap,” I whispered when he stopped and rested his forehead against mine.

“Eloquent as ever. ‘Holy crap,’ indeed.”

“You really love me.”

He dropped a kiss on the bottom of my earlobe, which for some reason turned my knees to jelly. I was glad I was sitting down.

“It hasn’t been apparent after the way I’ve been mooning after you like some lovesick boy? Are all women in the twenty-first century so daft headed?”

I so loved this man. I even loved him when he teased me.

Which I hadn’t told him yet. And probably should.

“By the way, because it sounds like you don’t know, I don’t love James. I love you. I’ve loved you for so long that I don’t remember what it’s like not to love you. I came back in time for you.” I heard his breath catch, and I kissed him then, trying to show him the way he had shown me. He wrapped me in his arms, pulling me onto his lap, and kissed me into oblivion, making me forget what I had been trying to accomplish in the first place.

“Please don’t ever leave me again,” he murmured against my throat, giving me goose bumps.

“I guess I can stay for as long as you need me.”

“I plan on needing you for forever.”

That worked for me. As did the making out that immediately followed.

When we were finally forced to come up for air, I laid my head against his shoulder. I had not only mourned the loss of him but the loss of home. And I had found both, here in his arms.

“Marry me.”

This time when he said it, it wasn’t about honor or codes or anything else. I loved him, and he loved me, and that was all that mattered.

“Are you asking or commanding me as lord of the manor?”

That made him laugh, which made me laugh. “Asking. But willing to command it if the answer is no.”

I wished he could see my eyes, to see into my soul and know how very much I meant the word, “Yes.”

There was more kissing and talking. I told him I had found the spell to take me home and why I hadn’t left. He told me about his realizations that night and what had happened when he found me bloody and unconscious. I told him that I would happily stay in this century, with his family. “Because you’re worth giving up showers for,” I said.

“We should have been honest from the beginning,” he said in between kisses. “We would have saved ourselves a great deal of heartache. Promise me that we’ll never keep anything from each other ever again.”

“I promise.”

Whoops. I was still keeping one secret from him. And I had rationalized it away earlier, thinking it wasn’t my secret to tell, but I wanted a completely clean slate. “I realize this might sound crazy, about as crazy as time travel—which happened, keep that in mind. But your sisters, your mother, your aunts . . . they’re witches.”

Of all the things I expected him to say in response, the one I hadn’t anticipated was, “Oh yes. I know.”

“What?”

“All the men in our family know. Fathers tell sons and sons-in-law. We’ve always known. But the women believe that we don’t, and we let them think it. Only men who love them are allowed to know. It’s why the women of my family always marry for love. Their fathers would not permit it to be any other way. They are too special to be with any man or in a marriage of convenience.” He pushed back the hair from his forehead. “One of my earliest memories is of my oldest sister levitating me on my rocking horse six feet up in the air. I fell off and got this scar.”

Aha! That’s where the scar came from.

“Not to mention my mother had a rather extensive collection of occult books.”

I heard the soft sound of bells and horses neighing from somewhere behind us. It made me remember where we were and what we’d been doing. “Your poor coachman sitting out in this rain the whole time we’ve been sucking face.”

“I sent him home on Neptune when I arrived. I instructed him to let them know that we were safe. But I believe we’re about to have company. If I had to wager a guess, I would bet it is my aunt.”

Sighing heavily, I slid off his lap and over to the opposite bench. He moved like he was about to follow me. “Sit down. Propriety and stuff, remember?”

I could feel his grin from here given our lack of said propriety and stuff for the last hour or so. “It would not matter now. We’ve been alone together in the dark and we have to wed.”

Sneaky, adorable jerk. “What are we going to tell them?” Some tiny part of me, despite all his reassurances, feared he might want to take back his words when confronted with his family.

He immediately put those fears to rest. “I will tell them that you have bewitched me. Enchanted me. Brought my cold, dead heart back to life.”

I leaned over to smack him on the arm. “You can’t say that. Then Charles will know I told you. And I’m not a witch at all. I just want to be clear.”

“I’m not certain I believe that,” he said, the smile in his voice evident. “Because every kiss from you, my beautiful Emma, feels like a magical spell being cast upon my soul.”

I so loved it when he said my real name. I was going to cast a lot of spells on him later.

The other carriage pulled up alongside ours, and the flames in the covered lamps showed that it was Charles who pulled back the curtain with an inquisitive expression, James peering over her shoulder. “Well? Did she say yes?” his aunt asked.

“She said yes,” Hartley confirmed. I heard James hoot and Charles’s sound of triumph.

They congratulated us, and we thanked them. Charles had brought along an extra coachman with her, and he turned our carriage around to take us back to Rosewood. I half expected her to join us or demand that one of us get in the other carriage, but she didn’t. They left us alone.

Which had Hartley back by my side, holding me and kissing me. It was like he couldn’t get enough of me, which I understood given that I felt exactly the same way.

Lightning flashed outside, but I was busy and barely noticed it.

“It seems that when we are together, like this, the storms don’t scare you,” Hartley observed as he wrapped a loose curl around his finger.

He was right. Being in Hartley’s embrace made me feel safe and caused the rest of the world to disappear. “I guess you’ll just have to kiss me every time there’s a storm.”

“There are a great deal of storms in England,” he warned in a teasing tone. “But I suppose that can be arranged.”

I wanted to tell him I was looking forward to it, but then he made everything else cease to exist.

* * *

We were married six weeks later to the surprise of absolutely no one. I had wanted a small affair, just immediate family, but nobody would hear of it. Julia and Jessica were sent for, and I finally got the chance to know and love his younger sisters as they helped me plan and prepare for the wedding. I adored them as much as I did Jane, James, and Charles. Jemima was to be our flower girl but only if she promised not to use any magic whatsoever.

The one black mark on my day was that Bex couldn't have been there with me as my maid of honor. I knew I would miss her, but this was where I belonged.

I wasn't allowed to have a white wedding gown, as that apparently wasn't a thing yet, and I ended up with a beautiful pale-blue muslin dress with a silver overlay, his family's colors. A fact which delighted him, but I was the only person who could tell that, as he put on a somber face for what seemed to be the entire population of London (Charles had not been kidding when she said they were related to practically everyone in the *ton*). He looked ridiculously handsome in his black cutaway jacket and top hat. They made his eyes appear even bluer.

Early in the morning at St. George's Church in Hanover Square, I plighted him my troth (whatever that meant), and he gave me a gold wedding ring to wear, and we kissed, ever so briefly. I carried white orange blossoms in my bouquet, knowing how much he loved the scent. There was a breakfast at the townhouse afterward, and everywhere I went, with everyone I talked to, I could feel my husband's loving gaze on me.

The best part? Our wedding cake was a giant Twinkie. People remarked on the unusualness of our choice, but I couldn't stop grinning as we cut the cake and served it to our legion of guests.

Then having waited long enough, Hartley announced our departure. Which was just upstairs to his room. There was a final toast to our longevity and happiness, a demand for another brief kiss, and then Hartley was rushing me out of the room and to the stairs.

"While we are already across the threshold, I have decided to compensate by carrying you to our rooms." Without warning he swooped my legs out from under me and started climbing.

“There are a lot of stairs.” And I was not light. Yes, he was strong and masculine and impressive, but still.

“It is an ancient tradition. I am carrying you up these stairs, and that is final. Now please be quiet so I can concentrate.” His steps seemed to be slowing a bit.

“Now there’s a turn-on. ‘Oh baby, be quiet, would ya?’”

He gave me one of his looks, but I still giggled.

“You know, Rhett Butler carried Scarlett O’Hara up the stairs in about two seconds.”

His grip on me tightened. “Really? And who is this Mr. Butler you speak of?”

“He’s a character from a book. And a movie. About the Civil War.”

Was it my imagination, or did he sound a little winded? “Civil War? That sounds like a contradiction in terms.”

“It’s a war that will take place in America in about fifty years over slavery. North versus South. The North’s going to win.”

Hartley readjusted how he was holding me, pausing for a moment. “It sounds as if those doing business with the southern half of the United States will lose a great deal of money.”

I wasn’t a witch, but I realized that I had the ability to make my new husband rich beyond our wildest imaginations. I knew everything that was coming and when it would happen.

No wonder Charlie Portwood had so much money in the future. It was probably all thanks to me.

We got to the first landing, and Hartley leaned up against the wall. “There are more stairs than I remember.”

“You could put me down, and I could walk, Mr. Macho. I can’t help the way I am. Not all of us can be miniature like Lady Kitty.”

“But if I were carrying Lady Kitty, I would be there by now.”

Outrage made my jaw drop, and I smacked him against the shoulder while he laughed, his shoulders shaking both him and me. I never should have told him how jealous I was of her and him. “Why do you say stuff like that?”

“Because I love to tease you, Countess. The way your eyes blaze, how your cheeks blush pink. I find it very fetching and plan on investigating how far that blush goes very soon.”

He kissed me—a kiss that was a promise of things to come. I couldn't believe how much I loved this man.

Hartley resumed his trek. "Speaking of, has anyone addressed what's about to occur?"

"The wedding night? No, nobody gave me the talk." I was actually a little disappointed that neither Charles nor Jane had stepped up to the plate. Not even for a "lie back and think of England" kind of deal. "But I probably know more about it than you might imagine. I had movies and the Internet. We even learned about it in school."

That made him stop cold. "In school?"

"Yeah. I know what's supposed to happen, just not how it feels. But I do know that if you're any good at it, I'll enjoy it."

There was a wicked gleam in his eyes that made me fall in love with him all over again. "Was that a challenge, Lady Hartley?"

I couldn't believe the thrill that sent straight through my core. "I think it was, Lord Hartley."

"You know that I never back away from a challenge."

I nipped his neck. "I'm counting on it."

Suddenly he flew up the last flights of stairs as if I weighed no more than a feather, which made me laugh. We were in his room, and he kicked the door shut behind us, laying me gently on his bed. He stood over me, studying me. "Do you know how often I have imagined this moment?"

Probably as often as I had. I felt nervous, but it was heavily outweighed by the anticipation and excitement. One of my shoes slipped off my foot, landing on the floor.

"Look at that. Lost shoe. Now I really am Cinderella."

His fingers brushed the inside of my arch, making me all shivery. "You haven't the feet for it, my love."

I gasped in mock outrage as he laughed, and I pulled him to me so that we could kiss. When he leaned back and started pulling the pins from my hair, I asked, "Do you think we'll live happily ever after?"

Hartley paused, his expression so full of love it made my heart swell. "My darling wife, our story began once upon a time. Happily ever after is the only possible way it could end."

EPILOGUE

“Hartley, I am not kidding. If he has leeches, you are going to break every jar. Promise me you won’t let him put any leeches on me.” Another labor pain hit, and I gritted my teeth and tried to yell less loudly than I had been. I also tried not to think about how often mothers and babies died during or shortly after childbirth and that I was doing this without a hospital or modern medicine. I had never understood why anyone in my century would choose a home birth on purpose. Studying history taught you just how often things could, and did, go wrong.

“I promise, my love. No leeches.” Hartley kissed my forehead, and I wanted to punch him. Why was he touching me? “Are you quite certain it wouldn’t be better for me to be downstairs while you . . .”

I grabbed him by the front of his shirt and yanked him down to me. “You did this to me, and you can be here to support me. I don’t care what men usually do after they knock up their wives and then force them to labor all by themselves. This is what you’re doing.”

“You’re making the doctor blush,” he murmured, and I could not have cared less whether or not that man was embarrassed. He was about to get a full frontal view of my nether regions, but I wasn’t allowed to talk about how this pregnancy had actually started?

Another wave of pain hit me, and I began saying random stuff about Hartley and his family. Like I was speaking in tongues.

Apparently not all of it had been kind, as Hartley looked insulted when he replied, “I’ll have you know my mother was a lovely woman, thank you very much.”

Why wasn’t he holding my hand? Didn’t he know that I needed him to touch me?

“Make the doctor scrub his hands in hot water with soap. Under the fingernails, too. Clean gloves if he has them. And if he’s using any instruments, have him sanitize them in a flame.” None of this was new information. I had been drilling it into my husband for months now. “I am so hot. Get these blankets off me.”

Hartley did as I asked, and another wave of pain slammed into me, and there was more yelling and possibly more casting aspersions on his parentage.

“You are so brave, my love. So strong. I love you.”

“Seriously, shut up.” I had seen movies about women giving birth but had never actually attended one of those breathing classes. I tried to remember how to do it but ended up sounding like an injured cow.

“That is the bad ‘shut up’ and not the good one, correct?”

“Yes! Stop talking now! And I’m so cold. Why did you take all the blankets off?” Why did this hurt so much? And why did women do this on purpose? Everything about this sucked. What good were these excellent birthing hips if I had to be in agony for hours on end? “I would seriously kill someone for an epidural right now.”

“Epidural?” Hartley repeated.

“It’s a drug that takes away the pain of childbirth.”

“My lady, no such drug will ever be created. Women were meant to feel this pain as punishment for Eve’s sin,” the doctor informed me. Believe it or not, he was actually the best doctor we could find with the highest success rate. Which was why I was willing to put up with his stupidity and not tell him that yes, such a drug would exist someday, and if God really still wanted us to suffer needlessly, he never would have allowed us to have it.

One more thing to add to my stuff-I-was-going-to-invent list.

The pains came closer and closer together and hurt more and more. I sweat. A lot. And screamed. A lot. And pushed. A lot.

And finally, finally, finally, it was done. Over. There was a baby crying, and it awoke something feral and primal in me, and I wanted my child.

“Congratulations, my lord. You have a son,” the doctor announced as he cleaned up my little boy and took care of the aftermath. I reached for my baby, wanting him, and finally the doctor laid him in my arms.

Now I knew why women chose to do this. I looked at this perfect little creature born out of the love that existed between his father and me. He blinked up at me, his dark eyes serious. A rush of love, so strong and so intense, consumed me, and I loved this baby more than my own life. I would do anything to protect him.

I looked up at my husband and saw the same expression on his face—the wonder, the awe, the protective and enduring love. Hartley kept

pressing kisses on me and the baby, saying how much he loved us both, but I was too tired to respond.

"That was both the most horrifying and the most wonderful thing I've ever seen," he whispered. "We should have a dozen more."

Had I not been so exhausted, I might have kicked him. "It's a good thing I love you, Hartley."

"I will love you forever, Emma. And thank you for the most amazing gift anyone has ever given me."

There was a small blanket lain aside for the baby, and I reached for it, wrapping him up. I was glad for the babysitting I had done and that I knew about swaddling. "Do you want to hold your son?"

Hartley looked both terrified and thrilled. I handed him the baby. "Make sure you support his head and neck. He'll be floppy."

I had never been more in love with Hartley than I was when I watched him holding our boy. It changed our relationship in a way I never could have anticipated. Some part of me worried that having a baby would somehow take something away from us, but I realized it would give us more. More love, more family, more happily ever after.

"Where is my great-nephew?" Charles said through the door. "May we all come and see him yet?"

Not yet. This moment was still just for us. There would be plenty of time to meet all his loved ones later.

"What should we name him?" Hartley asked, stroking our son's soft skin.

"Charles Jaxon Damon Portwood," I said. "The next Earl of Hartley."

"Charles Jaxon Damon Portwood," he repeated. "Welcome to the world, Charlie."

* * *

Scotland Yard kept going over the security footage again and again, but no one could explain why Emma Damon went into the Rose Room but did not come back out. Bex had called them after Emma hadn't come home, explaining she was not the kind of girl who stayed out all night, but they had ignored her. It wasn't until someone at the department put two and two together and realized that the young woman who had tripped a silent alarm

at Hartley Hall was the same one reported missing that they had brought Bex to the Hall to answer questions.

But she knew nothing. None of this made sense. She answered the same questions over and over, but it seemed so pointless. Bex didn't know what to make of it. Had Emma been kidnapped? Hurt? Murdered?

She had long since run out of tears, waiting helplessly, not understanding what had happened to her best friend. She felt a warm, comforting hand on her shoulder and looked up.

Charles Jaxon Damon Portwood VIII.

"I'm so sorry about your friend. But I have something I need to give you. Will you come with me?"

Bex followed him into a sitting room that was off-limits to the public. He closed the door behind him. "Please, sit."

She sank onto the love seat, not sure what he was doing or why she was here. He sat down next to her, looking very grave.

"Last spring I was given a letter that said I was to hire an American, Emma Damon, for a summer job at the foundation and was given her contact information with the promise that more instructions would follow. Two weeks ago a box was delivered. It was a box that had been in the care of our family's attorneys for hundreds of years, they claimed. There were specific directions that went along with the box. It was to be given to me, on that date, with a letter." Charlie reached inside his shirt pocket and pulled out an old, wrinkled piece of paper. "You can see how old it looks, but the writing on it seemed modern. It said that I was to find Mary Frances Smith and deliver this box to her today."

"You . . . you think that's for me?" Bex wondered whether she was hearing things, as none of this made any sense.

"I do." He edged closer to her, placing the large box on the low table in front of them. "And I've been looking for you ever since the box came into my possession. Last night, when I realized you were the woman I'd been looking for, I ran off to get it so that I could deliver it to you."

So she hadn't run him off because she repulsed him. That was at least some small consolation.

"I would very much appreciate it if you could open it, as the anticipation has been killing me."

Bex understood that. There was no way she could have waited if someone had given her an old historical box and had told her not to open

it. She admired his integrity and patience.

The box was wrapped in thick paper, tied with strings that were partially held in place with wax seals. She broke the seals, took off the strings, and carefully removed the paper. The box itself was a beautiful lacquered wood that had the Hartley crest engraved in the top.

For a moment she was almost afraid to open it. As if she knew it held something she didn't want to see. There was a small latch, and she unhooked it, slowly lifting the lid.

Inside, the box had a pale-blue velvet interior. There was an envelope addressed simply to "Bex." She recognized the handwriting as Emma's. Underneath, she found a cell phone and a Mickey Mouse watch that looked really old, sitting on top of a bunch of leather-bound journals. "This is Emma's watch," she said, not understanding. "You said your attorneys had this for hundreds of years?"

Charlie nodded. "They checked the dates. It had been in their possession since the nineteenth century."

She held the phone and watch in her hands, knowing they were Emma's but realizing that was impossible.

The letter had to explain it.

November 30, 1872

Dearest Bex.

I know you must be worried right now, and my guess is you probably even called the police. But I wanted to let you know that I'm fine. That something unbelievable happened to me, and even though I've given you the proof that what I'm saying is true, I know it will be a lot to digest.

Thanks to a magic spell, the last time you saw me (which would have been last night for you) I went back in time to 1816. And I met the most wonderful man imaginable, Jaxon Portwood, Earl of Hartley. It was a bit slow going at first, but eventually he figured out that he was a moron and I was the perfect woman for him and that he loved me and I loved him and we were meant to be together.

I am so happy, Bex. Happier than I had ever imagined. Remember how I always wanted the white picket fence? I got something even better. A man I couldn't live without and six kids. Three boys, three girls. Our own little Brady Bunch. And so many grandchildren I think I've lost count. I knew I couldn't tell you everything I wanted in a letter, so I kept a journal and wrote in it every day. I figured it would be like you were there with me. I

also took a couple of pictures with my phone before it died completely. You probably won't be able to turn it on, but I'm hoping you can take the SIM card to an expert and off-load the photos so you can see that what I'm telling you is true.

I know you've sworn off men, but love is worth everything. It's the only thing that matters. There was a way for me to come home, but I chose Hartley. And I have chosen him every day since. Even when he drives me crazy. It is worth every heartache, every pain, every fight you must fight to have it.

I think I'm getting close to the end. Hartley has refused to accept it and has threatened to scour the heavens for me if I dare leave him. I take comfort in knowing that he will.

You were my family before I had a family. I have loved you and missed you for decades. More than anything, I want you to be happy. To not bury yourself in work but to find love.

The men in this family are raised to love intelligent, amazing women, and I hope that you will give my great-great-great-great (etc.) grandson a chance. Since you couldn't find the perfect boyfriend, I made one for you. I told him he'd be a great fool to pass up the chance to get to know you. The rest is up to you.

I love you, Bex. Thank you for being my friend.

Love,

Emma (Countess of Hartley. How cool is that?)

The tears started flowing, and the historian in Bex held the letter away, determined not to get it wet.

Charlie handed her a handkerchief and asked, "May I?"

She gave him the letter, not caring if he read the matchmaking part. It was too fantastic, and she wanted someone else to know what was going on. If it were true, it would certainly explain why the phone and watch looked like antiques.

When she got her emotions back under control, she reached for the first journal. The first entry was dated September 20, 1816, and it began, *I think I'm pregnant. Hartley is going to freak out.*

Charlie let out a deep breath after he finished the letter. "That was not what I expected."

"How is that even possible?" Bex asked. "Magic spells? Time travel?"

He smiled as if he knew something she did not. “I have two cousins who might be able to explain it. I recognize this earl’s name. There’s something I should show you.”

“No more boxes with letters from my missing friend,” Bex protested, not sure she could take any more shocks.

He stood up, offering her his hand. “No more boxes. Something better.” After a moment’s hesitation she took it, his hand warm and strong. Charlie looked at their joined hands, as if considering something. “Trust me.”

And strangely enough, the girl who trusted very few people did just that. The young earl led her through more rooms that were off-limits to the public. Rooms Bex didn’t know existed. He turned on the lights in a long portrait gallery and took her to the end of the room.

“I knew I recognized the name.” He stopped in front of a portrait, and Bex gasped.

There was Emma. With her Hartley. Their oldest son must have been about twelve and her youngest daughter just an infant, but all her children had been painted with her. Emma was older but still beautiful. The letter was real. She had gone back in time. Everything she’d said was true.

“She looks happy, doesn’t she?” Bex asked.

“She looks loved,” Charlie said. They stood in silence, staring at the happy family. Bex’s mind hurt as she thought of all that had occurred to make this possible.

And Charlie still held her hand.

“You know, I’ve read some of the papers you’ve submitted to the foundation, and you’re bloody brilliant. I must admit that I have wanted to ask you to dinner for some time, but women as smart and pretty as you are a little bit intimidating. But seeing as how my great-granny wanted us to spend time together, I’d be a fool not to. Not to mention that I think we have a lot to discuss. What do you say?”

It was everything she’d ever wanted Charlie to say to her. It was like magic. “I say definitely yes.”

He gave her a brilliant, knicker-twisting grin and tugged gently at her hand, wanting to lead her from the gallery. Bex looked back over her shoulder, and although she knew it was impossible, it seemed that Emma’s smile had widened, secure in the knowledge of her own happiness, and maybe even in knowing of Bex’s happiness to come.

NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

Authors often talk about “the book of their heart.” *Once Upon a Time Travel* is that book for me. I first thought of the idea back in 2005. I have always adored Regency romances and chick-lit (which was still a thing back then!) and thought about how much fun it would be to combine the two. Time travel was “out” in the publishing industry and I couldn’t imagine any publisher who would be interested in a paranormal/chick-lit/romantic comedy/time travel book. So I didn’t write it. I had family obligations and deadlines for the small publisher I worked with at the time. I could only hope that the market would change and that someday I would get to tell this story.

Emma and Hartley just sort of showed up and began talking inside my head. I always keep pads of paper around my house to write down snippets of dialogue, jokes or scenes for the stories I’m working on. And even though I had no room in my schedule to write it, I just kept adding to that legal pad of mine. Page after page after page. Multiple legal pads were filled. I envisioned writing a whole series about Hartley’s siblings, and started plotting out James, Jessica and Julia’s stories as well.

Then the indie publishing revolution happened. I had a break in my schedule. I decided that I would sit down and write this story and publish it myself. The most difficult part was organizing all those notes into a cohesive outline (and cutting some things from my notes that didn’t work for the book). When I got to the carriage scene, it was like I could not type fast enough. I had imagined the ending of this book so many times that I experienced the most joy I’ve ever felt while writing. And fortunately, I found a publisher willing to take a chance on this book of mine!

I’ve been told that there wasn’t an 1812 English version of *Grimms’ Fairy Tales*. There is one in Hartley’s library and given that time travel and magic are real in this story, I figured my readers wouldn’t care about me being a few years off (and who knows? Maybe Hartley translated a version early).

If you’d like to find out when I’ve written something new, make sure you sign up for my newsletter at www.sariahwilson.com. I promise not to

spam you. It’s all I can do to get a newsletter sent out even once a month.

And if you are so inclined, I would be most appreciative if you would be kind enough to leave me a review on Amazon or Goodreads.

Thank you!

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

To all my readers—I know this isn’t what I exactly like what I typically write, but I hope you love it as much as I do.

Thank you so much to Mariette Franken at Kindle Press for accepting this manuscript, and to her team for all their hard work. A special thank you to Megan Mulder, who took me out to dinner last July and asked what I was working on. When I told her about my plan to publish this book independently, she didn’t understand why I hadn’t submitted it to Kindle Press even though I had just spent that entire writers’ conference telling every other author I came across to submit there. Thank you to Haley for her editing and suggestions; thank you also to authors Rebecca Connolly and Suzanne Erickson for their comments and excellent copyediting. Thank you to the lovely women who beta read for me and gave me their thoughts. A big thank you to Scarlett Rugers, who went through quite a lot of revisions to get me this absolutely gorgeous cover.

Thank you to the actors I dedicated this book to—Nadia Bjorlin and Jay Kenneth Johnson. There’s some shades of Philip and Chloe in here if you know what to look for. Over a decade ago you guys followed your dreams and created something I absolutely adored. I wrote some fan fiction about my favorite couple, and that first attempt at writing made me believe that I could follow my dreams, too.

To my kids—much as I love writing books, I love you a million times more.

And, as always, all my love to Kevin—I don’t know who or what I would be without you.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Bestselling author Sariah Wilson has never jumped out of an airplane or climbed Mount Everest, and she is not a former CIA operative. She has, however, been madly, passionately in love with her soul mate and is a fervent believer in happily ever afters—which is why she writes romances like The Royals of Monterra series. After growing up in Southern California as the oldest of nine (yes, nine) children, she graduated from Brigham Young University with a semi-useless degree in history. She currently lives with the aforementioned soul mate and their four children in Utah, along with three tiger barb fish, a cat named Tiger, and a recently departed hamster who is buried in the backyard (and has nothing at all to do with tigers).

For more information, visit her website at www.SariahWilson.com.

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